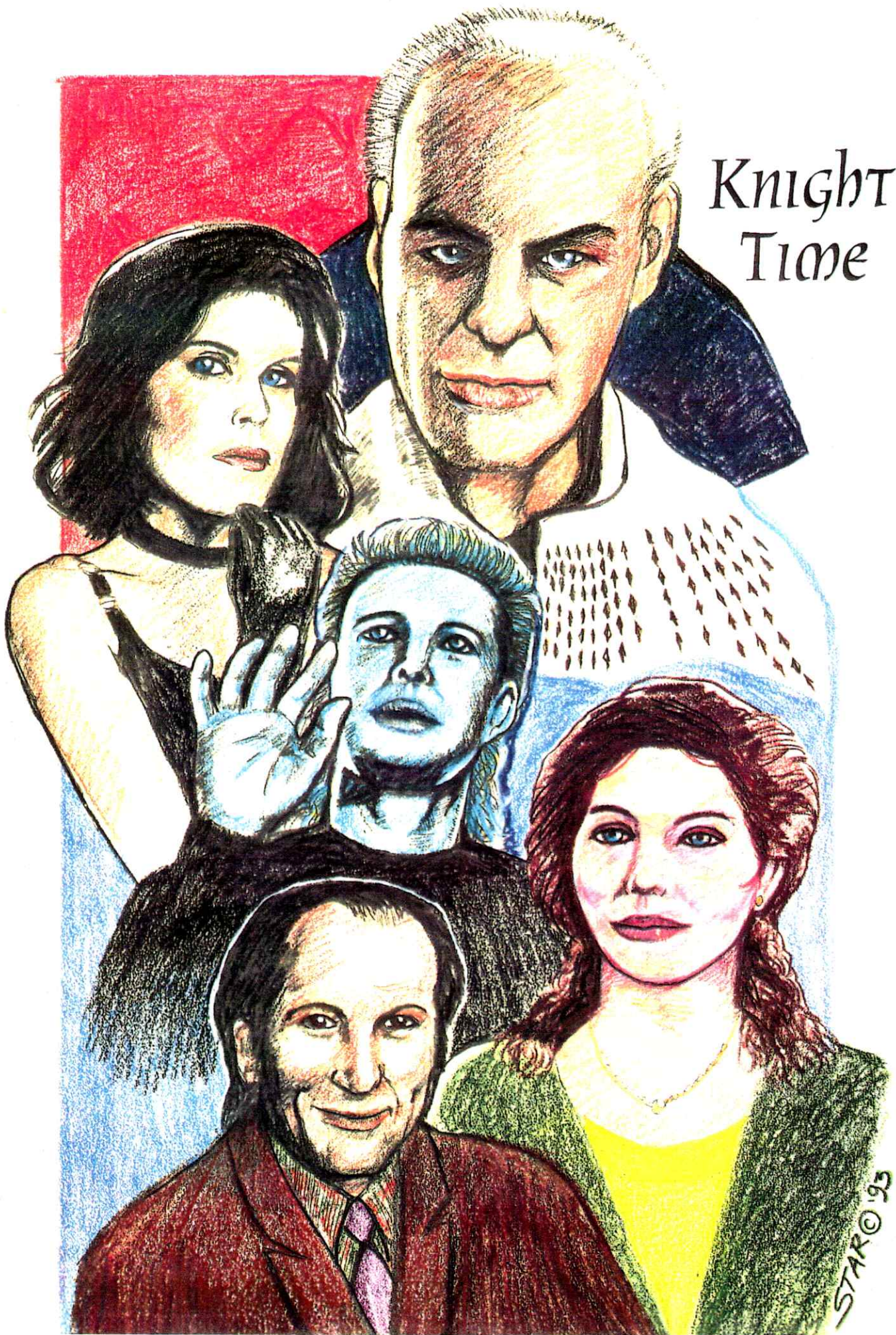


# Knight Time



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# *Knight Time*

*A Forever Knight Fanzine*

*Edited by: Gina Alkazian*

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# From The Whacked-Out Editor

Dear Fans of Forever Knight,

Hello from Earthquake infested Northridge. As is my custom I present my thoughts on writing my zine.

First of all I want to apologize to my patrons for the lateness of this zine. We had intended to get it out for Halloween but things just didn't workout. As any zine producer will tell you Fanzines are not a perfect art form. But here it finally is.

I was very excited about doing this zine because I not only love the show but respect the creators attempt to provide us with something fresh and unique. It is wonderful to know that I was not alone. I have conversed with several fans on Genie and on the phone and the overwhelming acceptance of this strange show is great.

I have been informed that FOX Broadcasting Network has picked up Forever Knight as a prime-time show. At presstime there was no exact date mentioned but....WOW!! YAHOO!!

Well enough frivolity. I would like to thank my writers and artists for their contributions and there support. They kept me going when my house was falling down around me (literally) and my computer crashed. A special thanks to my comrade in crime Star Urioste who is more than a friend and an artist who can do a picture from a description on the phone.

To my husband Steve who got the computer up and running the next day after the quake. He is also the Hero who saved our lives that Monday morning.

Finally I would like to thank the fans who stood by this show when it was canceled and won Victory from the jaws of CBS. You're the greatest.

Well that's all I want to say for now except turn the page and enjoy. The nighttime is the right time to play. Sooo lets play.

Be Well

Gina Alkazian

# *A Knight to Remember*

By: Star Urisote

The willowy, blue eyed, dark haired beauty from Nick's past, stood in front of Nicholas' refrigerator and stared at the forlorn bottles of cow blood inside. Jeanette did not approve of Nicholas' odd choice of appropriate nourishment.

"Have you no human blood in this infernal contraption?" She questioned, speaking in a normal voice. She knew his vampire hearing would pick up her voice, even if she whispered.

"In the bottom of the fridge," he replied weakly.

She opened the bottom door, removed several plastic bags of blood and flew to the second floor. Nicholas lay in his bed, covered only by his clinging satin sheets. He had been shot repeatedly as he stood in the line of fire between two warring street gangs. Most of the slugs had passed through him, but one had lodged in his abdomen. It had been hard to remove and had been painful.

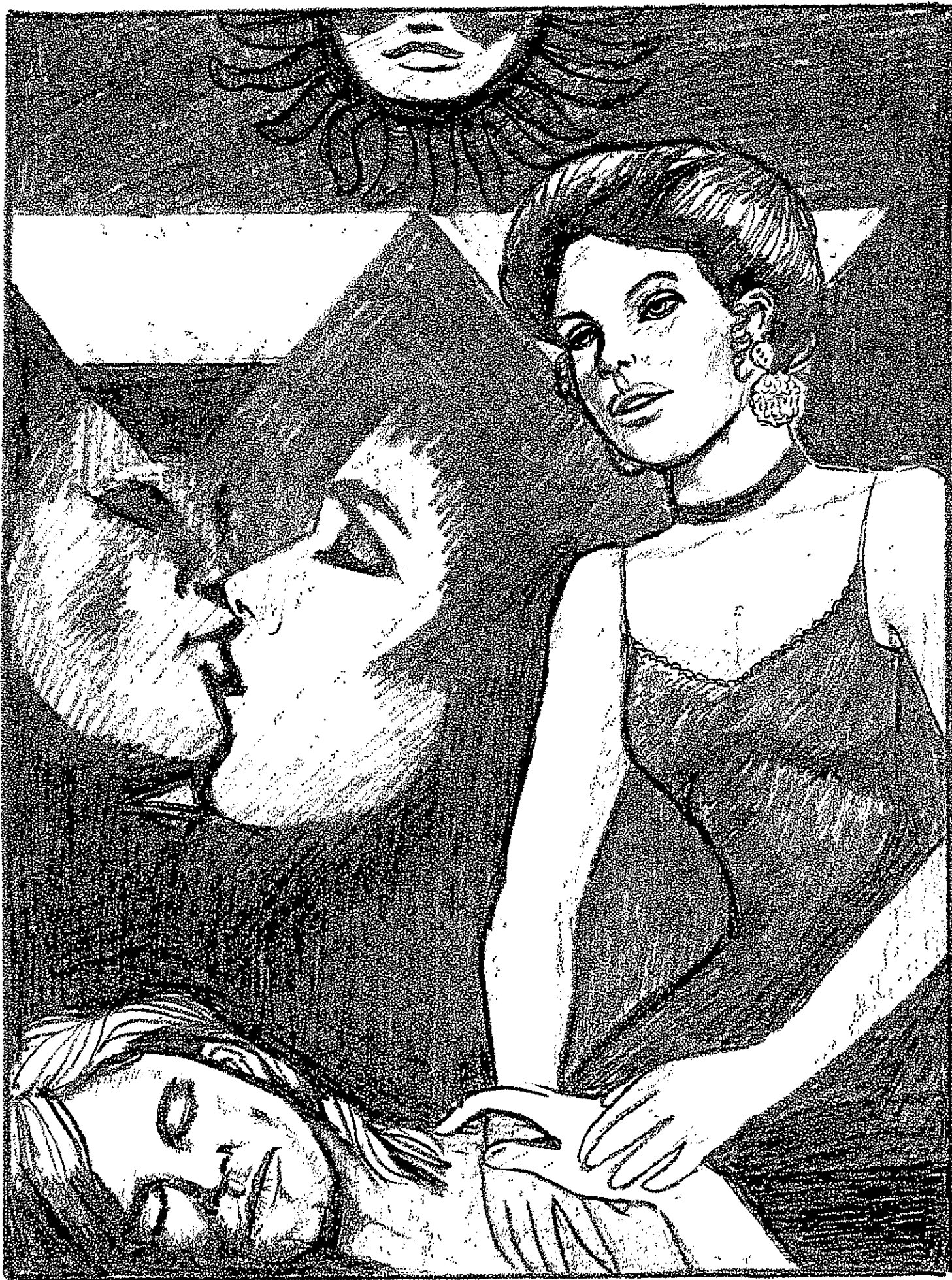
"You have never felt pain before, Nichola," Jeanette said as she wrapped the offending wound with a piece of clean cloth. "I wonder why it is taking your body so long to mend? You should be totally healed by now."

Nick didn't tell her about Nat's many attempts to bring him back over; how these attempts seemed to be slowly doing something to him. He was sure that the bullet wound and the pain were the result of the mortal stirrings of his body. But Nat was out of town and Schanke was up north on vacation with his family. Janette had been the only person he could turn to. She had come to him and helped to remove the bullet. The whole process had left him weak and unable to fend for himself.

Janette had been wonderful. Her tenderness had brought back old memories. She had always been there when it really mattered, making the difference between life and death. He owed her.

Sometimes he remembered the 'old days' when they were so much more than lovers. Their intimacy had transcended the physical and spiritual planes. Their lust had been unquenchable. What had happened? He knew. He had turned away from LaCroix and she had followed the master. The twilight of their relationship had been fated by LaCroix, even as he had ultimately stopped Nick from killing. It was ironic that LaCroix, the master manipulator, was the focal point of so many changes in Nick's life.





STOP © 95 A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

He hated this feeling of helplessness and it irked him to have to ask for help, it always had. Drinking the blood she'd brought up from the refrigerator, he contemplated the dark beauty before him. His old feelings were laced with strong emotions. As he let his mind remember those strong emotions, he felt the barricades he'd built to hide them crumble to dust.

"Don't worry, Nichola, I will tend you until your strength returns," she said with genuine concern, as she stroked a stray lock of hair from his forehead.

Her caress was soft as the petals of a white rose. The urge overcame him, he wanted to hold her again. She was not surprised when he pulled her into the circle of his. She and merely settled in, as if it was where she belonged.

With him, she wasn't the Ice Queen she pretended to be for the rest of the world. Her cool reserve melted away and was replaced by a hot sensuality. She traced the outline of his lips. He loved that. She knew all the little quirky things that pleased and pleased him. He liked to have her stroke his hair with her strong fingers. He had always been turned on by the way she snuggled into the curve of his throat, just before she bit into him. His desire for her flared inside him, but his own weakness prevented him from acting on that desire. He was sorry that he could only think of her blood lust and not experience it. Breathing deeply, his frustration sounded in a soft growl.

She felt his frustration, but, rather than add to it, she moved away. She picked up another bag and filled his goblet with the cool blood. Though the refrigerator kept the blood quite chilled, it was actually warmer than the body of the consuming vampire. So, for Nick, it was warm, not hot, as it would be if he were drinking it from its source, but at least it was palatable.

He drank deeply. Then he took her hand and kissed it, looking into the depths of her sapphire blue eyes. The fire of nights past warmed his thoughts and he did not let go of her.

"Thank you, Janette. Once again I am in your debt."

"Your debt is extensive," she said with dry humor, "the interest is now as large as the principle. We shall have to rectify the problem soon. But now you should sleep. That's what you need most. Sleep. I will stay close until you feel better."

He smiled his winsome little boy smile and, with her hand in his, he closed his eyes. As he settled into his pillows, she felt him drift away.

When Janette looked at him, her body, Pavlovian-like, reacted as it had for decades, for centuries. She fought, with everything that was in her, to control her desire for him. She looked at his handsome face, the hint of a smile that played upon his lips and she remembered how those lips felt for night after endless night. LaCroix had been an unbelievable lover. Together LaCroix and Nichola could fulfill every woman's ultimate sexual fantasy. But Nichola had brought something to their relationship that no one else ever had. He was a unique, playful, passionate, player at the game of love. Practiced in the art of love making and yet always so fresh and new. After all these long lifetimes, she still hungered for him.

When he had walked into the Raven, just a year ago, it had taken a Herculean force of will not to seek out his embrace, to kiss those exquisite lips, to linger close to that ancient heartbeat, to request admittance once again into his heart. Why had she let him drift away? Why hadn't she made the extra effort needed to keep him at her side? She knew, she knew too well. He'd moved into other realms, sought other lifestyles. And she, jaded by her many lovers, had thought that he would always be there for her. She had let the one lover who'd made her feel his presence above all others, simply slip away.

*What a fool you were! To have his love once more, to have him back in your arms, what wouldn't you give?*

Regret overwhelmed her, blood tears clouded her vision. She knew she would give everything that she was for him, without hesitation, without thought. The blood tears told her that he was more than just an old lover. He was the better part of her ancient life. He was the love of a lifetime and the tears were not enough of a tribute to his love. She looked at his angelic face. He still held her hand as he slept and the sensation of his skin against hers was exhilarating and sent her mind slipping into their dark shared past.



Their hunt had been successful that evening. Their hunger abated for another span of hours, they began what was almost a ritual of lovemaking. By candle light, in a secluded fortress they had found, they started slowly to devour each other with their eyes. Their lips and tongues touched and tasted one another. Nichola growled his pleasure and nibbled at her neck. Janette, impatient, started to draw the clothes from his body.

"My, we are eager tonight, aren't we?" Nicholas whispered to her as his hands held her in his firm grasp.

"I want you!" she growled huskily. As he held her at bay, her sharp fangs sought his tender flesh.



He kissed her, deep and full, then sent his tongue down the curve of her jaw, leaving a wet trail that felt on fire. All the while, his practiced hands slowly caressed and massaged her breasts through the fragile fabric of her undergarment.

"Why rush? We have an eternity of night," he teased, as he slid the clothing from her body. His mouth now sought out her breasts and he nibbled and suckled at them, each one in turn. She shuddered with delight as her nipples grew hard beneath his gentle persuasion. Her arms entwined about his head, cradling him to her breasts. She pressed herself seductively against him and his arousal was immediate. She growled and bore him down, pushing him into the comfort of the bed linens.

"What a feast you are, Nichola, what a rare and wonderful feast!" she said as she devoured and pleased him, finding ecstasy in giving him the bounty of her love and her lust, till, he took her into his arms, holding her there. His hands and lips and tongue moved continuously over her body. She felt his sharp fang against her skin, marks which would disappear moments after his mouth moved away from them. She was ensnared like a wild animal in a cage, untamable, but exalting in her bestial passions. Her dark soul flared like a brilliant light, to engulf him and consume him in her immortal fire. Unleashing her vampire urges Jeanette bit deeply into his yielding neck. Savoring the loveblood, she tasted his desire as it burned its way through her. Nicholas' body went limp as if surrendering to the ferocity and savagery of her bite. She had a definite power over him. He **was** her feast and she knew she had become the center of his feral love.

All that remained was to consummate their bloody feasting upon one another, their bodies casting dark intertwined shadows against the stone walls. Nicholas appeared to submit, but only until her ultimate orgasm lay within his easy grasp. Once she began to quake in his arms, he seemed to take control and pushed past her animal instincts to bring his own to bear. His strength and experience excited her as it moved them both closer to the rapture as their minds and bodies melted into a union of the flesh. The mystical joining of amorous blood within the veins of immortals took hold of them completely. Their bodies glistened in the shadow-light of candles made to dance by the sensual movement of their love making. He bit into her willing, soft, creamy flesh and she growled in ecstatic pleasure as the sharing of their blood brought her to the edge and over. Sharing for one sweet moment,...eternity, sharing a love born of lust, but consummated in tender, blood filled communion. They made love to each other until the morning star shone. Dawn would find her locked in Nicholas' embrace, as she slept the day away, her lust for him only partially quenched.



She was lost in the past, when she felt his powerful presence. Nichola was awake. The blood had done its work. His body had healed

totally from its injuries, his energy and strength returned to supernatural levels.

"Nichola," she breathed, as she looked into his fire-gold eyes and saw his sharp fangs exposed and gleaming in the soft light. He knew exactly where her thoughts had been, his had been there too.

"It's been so long...I remember...mon amour," he said in a husky, passionate voice.

She floated into his arms, she couldn't help herself. He grabbed her wrists and brought her close. Fiercely, he kissed her, his arms claiming her absolutely. His self-imposed celibacy was now burned away by a white hot passion that overrode all his fears and the memory of other lovers. Now, Janette was all and everything to him. The deeply ingrained memories, the endless nights of impassioned love came flooding back to overpower his senses.

Pushing him back into his pillows, she straddled his hips. He levitated from the surface of the bed, taking her into the air with him. Her clothing fluttered down to the floor, as he slowly undressed her. Their bodies linked and she became an extension of him. Her kisses rained upon him, her tongue licking away the emptiness, her heat setting his dark soul on fire. He caressed and fondled her body, knowing exactly how to illicit the responses he desired, knowing every inch of her being, wanting only to please her. Their mid-air fore-play was something that Janette had truly missed. Younger vampires did not have the strength or skill for it.

"I remember too, Sweet Nichola." She breathed as he continued to stroke her sensuous body and her breath caught in her lungs and her body quaked with rapture.

Nicholas floated down to the bed, rolling at the last possible moment, pinning her beneath him. He crushed her to him and filled her again and again with deep, penetrating kisses that she sought out hungrily. But, before he could attempt it, she bit deeply into his neck, sucking his blood from him, tasting his hunger, tasting his consuming desire. He, in turn, did the same to her. The blood was hot and sticky; their faces were smeared in the vital fluid and it dripped from their long fangs onto their cool bodies. They began to lick it from one another, tasting the loveblood, their wild lust exploding like a white hot inferno. Their bodies moving in unison, he entered deep into her. Her strong thighs held him to her, pushing him deeper, claiming all of him. They could only listen to the music of their hearts and dance on and on into the long hours of the night, neither able to stop, not wanting to ever stop. It was long hours of undulating ecstasy as they fed; each being a sumptuous feast for the other.

When they could go on no longer, they lay in each other's embrace; their sharp fangs still visible, their golden eyes still filled with the fires of the flesh.

Janette took a deep breath, as she usually did when she was shifting gears mentally. Nick smiled at how comfortable she felt. How well he knew every little nuance of her personality.

"That was...profoundly penetrating," she said wickedly, her side long glance captivating, her playful tongue licking her still wet lips.

"Yes, I think you could safely say that," he gazed at her as she lay next to him. "I can't believe how good that felt," he said, looking into her golden eyes.

He closed his eyes and smiled broadly, as he leaned against her, basking in an inner warmth that he was sure was all in his mind. She stroked his lips with her finger. It was something he found so soothing. She could almost feel him purring. He nestled into her arms, his head resting against her ancient heart, knowing she could give comfort as well as take it, without question.

"So tell me, Nichola, why have we waited so long?"

"Stubborn pride," he ventured, "we must never let it stand between us again. How can we deny what exists in us both? Our love is enduring and eternal."

"Is that a promise, Sweet Nichola?" She asked as she ran her strong fingers through his cornsilk hair. She encircled him in her embrace as if he must never leave that protection again.

"That is a definite threat," he said with enthusiastic self-assurance, as he took her in his arms, looking to ravage her body again. Willingly, she succumbed to the agelessness of his love.





# INVICTUS

By William Earnest Henley

Our of the night that covers me,  
Black as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the horror of the shade,  
And yet the meance of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of me fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.

# A Trick of the Light

By: Star Urioste

Last night, Nick had killed.

The 'Midnight Murderer', as the news hounds had dubbed him, was the first person he'd killed in the line of duty. The perp had been killing regularly, and indiscriminately for the last month, always at the stroke of midnight. He'd been a really crafty son-of-a-bitch, eluding the net they'd cast for him on several occasions. After last night's stake out, they'd trailed him to his booby-trapped warehouse. Schanke had gotten a little bruised, dodging a few bullets, but he would be OK. Midnight's grotesque house of horrors held mementos of his multiple kills, hung like trophies on the cavernous walls. It was a clean shoot, no question about it. Here was a serial killer who was on the other side of everyone's envelope.

Now, Nick was in his car driving back to that isolated warehouse. Something kept calling to him, virtually compelling him to return to the sinister darkness of the murderer's lair. He'd have to be quick about it, the night was growing short and he wasn't even half-way there. The return trip would take time as well and he'd still need to search the place. What had grabbed hold of his mind, an image, a fragment of a memory? He had to find it, whatever it was. There would be no peace for him until he did.

The wind in his hair gave him the feeling of freedom and, with the top down on his convertible, he experienced the full night sky. It wasn't as good as flying, but it was a close second. As the road slipped away beneath his wheels, he examined his life. Schanke, Nat, and Stonetree were the people that mattered in his life. The people who cared about him and that he cared for. How much more fulfilling was life now, compared to centuries past. After so many decades of ruin and decay, he felt a peace of mind that revitalized him. No longer did he hunt to survive. He hunted to serve, to protect the humanity that had once been his prey. He couldn't think of going back to what he had been. Fate had given him one last chance at a life of honor and friendship.

He parked the car just outside the foreboding structure. The abandoned warehouse contained only rats now, and the essence of a murderous evil. Carefully, Nick entered. They had checked for traps last night, but Nick still chose to be cautious. His acute senses scanning the way, he retraced his steps of the night before.

"Come on," he spoke to himself "what is it that's driving you crazy?"

He walked cautiously up a flight of stairs toward the second floor. The space around him erupted with sound and shrapnel, as a pressure

plate bomb, undetected the night before and concealed in a false step, exploded beneath him. Nick felt the initial shock as metal tore into him from below. Then, he and the stairway collapsed on to the first floor. As he fell within the twisted pile of rubble, his eyes caught the image of a face; a face from his past.

He cried out, "Angelical" as he descended into an oblivion too dark for even a vampire to escape.



Natalie was just finishing off the last of her night's work. There had been few deaths tonight and the morgue was almost empty. She felt a little tired and just a bit on edge, though she didn't know why. Massaging her neck and shoulders, she stretched and tried to chase the feeling away. Maybe it was just the stress from the night before.

Walking past her desk she saw that the message light on her phone was lit. She settled behind her desk and took up a pad and pencil. The machine voice said, 'You have one new message, dated October 10th at 8:30 PM.'

"Nat," Nick's charming voice issued from her telephone, "I'm heading out to our murderer's lair. There's something I want to check out, but it's a long drive and I may not be able to get back by sunrise. If Schank starts asking, cover for me. Tell him I'll be back after sunset. Thanks." Even listening to his recorded voice made her smile. How different he was from the jaded and bitter man she'd met years ago. He still had his serious side, but he smiled and laughed much more frequently now.

*OK, Nick, I can do that.* She pushed her pad and pencil back to a far corner of her desk and started to straighten up the stacks of papers before her. *Now why would he want to go back out there?* She looked at her watch. It was nearly six a.m., her shift would be over soon. She prioritized her paperwork for tomorrow and straightened up the place for the day shift.

A nagging little feeling kept crawling back and forth across her mind. She was worried about Nick. She hit the first auto dial number on her phone and listened as Nick's phone rang. His machine picked up. Nick's disembodied voice spoke in somber tones. "I'm either asleep or incommunicado, leave your name and number."

"Nick, pick up, if you're there. Nick I need to talk to you, pick up, will you?" There was no reply to her summons. He hadn't made it back in time. She tried to remember the warehouse. What condition was it in, would it protect Nick from the light of day?



Nat quit worrying about him. He can take care of himself. He's been doing it for eight hundred years. What could possibly happen to him? Yet each time she tried to placate herself with those thoughts, she felt fear bubbling up inside her.

"Why do you do this to yourself?" she sighed in resignation. Signing the last of her releases for the mortuaries, she slipped out of her office and into her car. Driving as if a life depended on it, through the beginning of rush hour traffic, she made her way toward him. *Please, Nick, let this be my over active imagination working here.* Trying not to think of all the terrible possibilities, she settled in, concentrating on the long drive ahead of her.



She parked next to Nick's car. She went quickly to the Caddie's trunk, knowing Nick slept there when stranded after dawn. Receiving no answer to her tentative, then frantic, knocking, she grabbed her medical bag and dashed into the warehouse. The morning sun was reaching up into the sky. Some parts of the ravaged roof let in shafts of the unforgiving sunlight. It took a few minutes for her eyes to adjust to the dark interior. The overpowering smell of cordite and burning flesh made her heart beat frantically. What she found confirmed her worst fears.

Nick lay pinned beneath a pile of rubble. Badly injured, he was exposed to slender shafts of the weak morning light that were venting into the space he occupied. This was much worse than the explosion that had brought him to her in a body bag. Already, the light had burned away areas of his exposed skin. Powered by the driving force of adrenaline, she dropped her bag and started pulling the debris off his smoldering body. Fear gave her the strength to drag his bleeding, burned body into the depths of the shadows. Large shards of metal protruded from his body and his precious blood oozed from numerous wounds.

"Nick, Nick?" She called his name repeatedly with no response. *Can you kill a vampire, if you blow him up and burn him?* She didn't want to know the answer. Now that he was out of the sunlight, she stopped a minute to run outside to her car for some blankets, and returned to him quickly. Nick was a medical miracle, but just how much damage and stress could his body handle? Certainly there was a limit to even his super-human resources.

She pulled a small flashlight from her bag and started to examine him closely. Fragments protruded from every part of his body. Some of the burns were to the bone. In some places, even the bone was charred. He was cold, deathly cold. There was no pulse. He needed blood, human blood, to help stabilize him.



"There's only one source here," she spoke to Nick's inert form. She knew what she was attempting could well mean her own death. He hadn't killed in a hundred years, but, like a feral animal, he wasn't tame. At any moment, his vampire instincts could erupt and he would become the dangerous beast that hunted human prey. Human blood might take him up and over the edge, maybe beyond her ability to help him control his inner beast. She risked her life and his sanity. If he came back to life and found he had killed a loving friend, who was merely trying to save his life, what would **that** do to him?

She withdrew a scalpel from her bag. Mechanically, she cleaned the blade with an alcohol wipe and then her hand. Looking at her left hand, she made a deep incision on the outer edge of her little finger. She watched the blood start to flow. Her heart was pounding so hard it made her ears ring with its maddening thumps. She had to do it. His life was everything to her. Willingly, she tilted Nick's jaw up with her other hand, as she lay her bloody finger across his lips.

"I don't even know if this will work," she said as she covered him up with the blankets. "Please, Nick, give me a sign here." Taking his right hand into her lap, she touched the pulse point. Waiting for the slow steady pulse that would tell her she wasn't alone.

Looking at his sweet, youthful face, she wondered how many thousands of women had fallen in love with him, as she had that first time she'd seen him. Even by the light of her flash light, his face looked so peaceful and composed, the smallest touch of a smile playing upon his lips as it had that night she'd unzipped the body bag to find him within. What would it feel like to touch those lips with her own? Would their coolness be exciting as they traveled down the curve of her neck? What would it be like to make love to a handsome, eight hundred year old lover? Her breath caught in her lungs, the thought was so provocative. Surely, Nick was a sexual being, as well as a vampire?

"Nat," she scolded herself out loud, "cut it out."

Long minutes passed before her blood started to coagulate, causing the bleeding to stop. She heard the exhalation of air from Nick's body. The first sign of life she'd had in all that time. Removing her throbbing finger from his lips, she gently lifted his eye lid and flashed the light into it. The pupils didn't react. His eyes were the gleaming gold of a vampire. She put her finger to his lips, pushing them away from his teeth, looking for the exaggerated canines. They were there.

"What more can I do, Nick?" She asked of her unconscious companion. "I'm not an expert in the field of vampire care." Frustrated, she was watching him so intently that, when he opened his eyes, she actually jumped in surprise.

"Nick," she looked into his slitted cat's eyes. She had never seen him appear so weak and vulnerable. He always had a power and a strength about him, with just the right amount of imagined innocence to draw her to him.

"Nat, help me," he barely whispered, as he licked the drying blood from his lips. His golden eyes pierced straight through her. She felt the pain that he could not feel for himself.

"What do I do, Nick? Tell me what to do?" she pleaded.

His breathing was like that of a great cat. His face spoke of an unquenchable hunger. Trembling, his hand reached for hers and she knew he was very weak, for his grasp had no strength.

"Remove the shrapnel, can't heal with so much in me, be careful...pelvis feels shattered...keep bones from drifting apart...easier to mend."

He was fighting his inner demon; his breathing growing more raspy and carnivorous. He closed his eyes and forced the sound of her heart pumping the blood through her body from his ears, banishing the smell of her sweet mortal blood from his senses. He clung to his identity in this life. He was Nick Knight and this was Natalie, his co-worker, his friend, and the woman he loved.

Keeping her eyes on him, she put on her latex gloves. Pulling out a probe, several forceps and retrieving her scalpel, she started to work. Now that she knew what to do, she did it fast and efficiently, moving Nick as little as possible. Knowing he could feel little pain; still, she was as gentle as she could be with him. She knew that to acknowledge the beast, she might have to fight it, so she didn't.

"There's still a piece of metal inside me."

He brought her hand down to his groin area. "The piece of metal that shattered my pelvis entered through the adductor longus." She knew immediately where to look.

"How did you know that?" she said, impressed.

"You learn a little anatomy in eight hundred years, whether you want to or not," he whispered with that winsome smile of his. His vampire eyes, that usually glowed and flashed with energy, seemed faded and mute.

"Yes, I guess you would," she said, taking up the forceps.

Bending over his body, she probed the wound. The metal had gone deep into the body cavity. Even with her longest pair of forceps, she could just barely grasp it.

"Nick, I can't get a good grip on this last piece, not enough to pull it free."

His breathing was ragged and labored. He was close to the edge.

"I'm going to make an incision and pull it out," she said looking at him and stroking his hand in comfort.

He only nodded in silent consent and closed his eyes. He couldn't take too much more damage and she knew it.

She made the incision and tried to find the metal shard with a probe. She couldn't locate the offending piece right away and had to move the probe in and out several times. Frustrated, she finally gave up and placed her fingers into the incision and found it immediately. When she finished, she felt as exhausted as he was.

"Nat, I need more blood; healing takes a great deal of energy."

Without a moment's hesitation she drew her left glove off and picked up the scalpel. Nick saw the deep self inflicted cut on her finger, the knife in her hand.

"Wait, Nat, my saliva has anticoagulant properties." She offered him her hand, knowing that she might be sealing her own fate. There was a look in his eyes that she'd not seen before. When they'd first met his eyes had a cold and distant look to them, as if the pain in his soul was so great that he'd walled himself inside against intrusion. Now his eyes burned with an emotion she couldn't quite place and it frightened her.

He took her hand, licking the cut with his rough cat-like tongue. The wound opened. He was ravenous. The hot blood gave him color and helped mend his injuries with an impressive speed. Nat felt weak. It had been a long, stress filled night and she hadn't eaten since dinner time the day before. Her own energy reserves were being stretched to their limit.

"I'm feeling faint," she said, as she drew her hand away. Reluctantly, he let go of her, but his body still demanded more blood. She was light headed and he could see her wavering, as she closed her eyes and tried vainly to steady herself.

"I only took a pint, no more than you'd give at a blood bank," he said wanting to let her know that she had nothing to fear.

"How can you know how much you've taken?" Then changing the subject, focusing on the conversation, she said. "Nick, would you have died from these wounds?"

"No, but the sunlight would have killed me for sure," he said reaching up for the curve of her neck.

Nat looked back at where she had found him. The sun had angled in the sky. The place where he had been was now awash in brilliant sunlight.

"In my weakened condition I would have died in the light, without leaving a trace. I owe you my life. How did you know that I was in trouble?"

"I don't know. I got your voice mail. I called your place and you hadn't made it back. I just felt something was wrong."

Nat felt cold and then the building started to waver in her view.

"Nat, lie down next to me."

Willingly she lay down. He lifted the blanket and enclosed her in it.

"You are just weak from giving blood, it will pass. Just lie here with me, 'til we both get our strength back." She knew she was pushing her luck, but, in her weakened state, she felt totally under his spell. He cradled her head in his arms and protectively brought her close to his body. Stroking her throat, he seemed unable to stop his rising blood lust. Strangely, she had fantasized about being this close to Nick ever since she'd met him. She shivered into his cold embrace. Looking into his golden eyes, she wanted to put her arms around his neck and tell him how much she loved him, but she feared to do so. She feared rejection, feared that he would laugh at the needs of a mortal woman. She feared to know the truth about loving a vampire; that she might die of that love. Perhaps the last thing she would feel on this earth would be the killing thrust of his fangs into her neck.

She closed her eyes and lay her head within the circle of his arms, accepting her fate. He gazed upon her beautiful face. The blood lust gripped his mind, demanding that he feed. He wouldn't hurt the one person, who had given him hope and had made a space for him in her life without asking for anything in return. He owed her more than his life; he owed her his sanity. The taste of her blood stilled lingered on his lips. The salty, tantalizing taste of life, the heart's blood filled with oxygen and the pure food of the body. He wanted to bite deep into her carotid artery, to feel the vitality and the explosion of power that came with the dark feast. He fought the strong, almost overwhelming urges that had consumed him for so many centuries. He held her close and hoped his love for this woman would be enough to pacify the beast within him. Nat was like



Angelica. Both of them had not feared him. They both had ventured to understand him. He would not give Nat death as her reward, not as he had given Angelica.

He caressed Nat's hair, touching the shiny softness and inhaling its delicate fragrance. How loathsome to even think of harming his savior. His labored breathing showed how hard the battle raged within him. His heart would break with the effort of keeping her alive.

It was then that the picture again caught his eye. There, just a short distance away, the picture that had called him, across time and space. By what miracle did it happen to be here in this place of darkness and death? He looked upon the two faces in the painting and his heart knew again another time, another love.

Natalie opened her eyes and saw Nick all but salivating as he looked at her.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked with urgency in his voice.

"Yes," she lied. She knew she had to do something before his blood lust overcame them both.

"I must get back to my place, Nat. Can you get something for me before we leave? It's the reason I came here in the first place, a picture near the westward facing wall."

"Sure," she said.

"There," he said pointing in the right direction, "the explosion knocked it down and you can just see it on the floor."

She couldn't make it out, but walked where he indicated, holding her flashlight up to examine the area. She saw it and brought the picture back to Nick. It was an old and faded painting of Nick and another woman, who was leaning against him, her face full of life and happiness. Nick had an air of respectability about him and that playful smile of his was present. He looked just a bit roguish in his period clothing. Nat guessed that it had been painted some time in the eighteen hundreds. It was a picture of a gentleman, with his lady, posing by candle light.

"It's you, Nick!" she said in amazement.

"Put it in your bag. We need to get going, fast. You have to drive."

"Yes." She could see that he was losing the struggle with his inner demon. "Can you walk out to the car?"

"I don't think so."

"I can drag you on one of the blankets," she suggested.

"Good thinking. You'll have to wrap me in the rest of the blankets. They will start to smoke in the sunlight. The weave will let in the tiniest bit of light. Just get me to the trunk of my car. You can do that."

Stuffing the painting into her bag, she went out to his car, threw in her bag and opened the trunk. When she came back into the building, Nick was holding himself up on his elbows. He still looked spent.

Natalie gripped the blanket upon which Nick now rested and started dragging him towards the entrance, kicking debris out of her way as she made for the door.

"Nat, hurry," Nick hissed from the blankets.

As quickly as she could, she dragged him to the car. Tendrils of smoke emanated from the folds of the blanket, but she expected it and it didn't faze her.

Nick felt hunger gnawing at his mind, as well as his body. He gripped the edge of the trunk and, with her help, pulled himself inside. She closed the trunk with relief. He lay in the darkness and roared in hunger, as the blood lust took him completely. He suffered, knowing she could hear him through the walls of the car. Nick closed his eyes and thought only of the memory of Angelica. The hunger dissipated, as his mind focused intensely on the past. He felt all the pain and pleasure that he'd experienced there. And, for a moment, he was lost in time, incapable of comprehending anything but his vision of Angelica.



*It was winter and wind blew cold from the heavy, storm swollen seas. Storm after storm had cleansed the beach, leaving a crisp and vital freshness to the land. I rode a black stallion. Malimar he was called, a spirited beast, strong willed and thick limbed. Together, we raced along the beach front, the freedom of the wind was our only thought. The fog was coming in, the tide at full flood. I came through the tangled foliage and burst onto the empty beach. Empty, except for a lone figure that walked the wind swept sands.*

"My lady," I said, as I approached her, sweeping my hat in polite courtesy, "what misadventure brings you to this beach in the dark of the night?"

*At the sound of my horse, she turned toward me. Her midnight eyes and ebony hair shown against the porcelain of her skin. She was a plain woman. Her clothes were simple in their construction, yet the fabric was of*

the finest quality. She wore no wedding band, unusual for a woman of her age, breeding and position. Merriment and intelligence sparkled from out her eyes and her smile was as genuine and captivating as I had ever seen.

"Dear sir, would that I were your Lady. This is no misadventure, for I am a creature of the night."

Intrigued, I dismounted and drew near to her. She showed not the least amount of fear, alone on a deserted beach, a stranger as her only companion.

"Lady, you do tease this wretched soul before you."

"No more, sir, than you beguile me with your delicious perfection." Her eyes spoke with desire.

I laughed out loud at her comment. I'd never met so bold a woman. In that time and climate, women were mere prizes or chattel, not intelligent creatures that walked the dark night alone and unafraid of strangers.

"Will you accompany me, sir, as I take my walk? My name is Angelica, Angelica Chandler, of the house of Chandler. There, you can make it out just a mile or so inland."

Following her directions, I saw the huge house further inland, the fog from the sea slowly creeping towards its massive structure.

Her eyes caught mine and I was lost in them. Their depth was unfathomable. I stood my ground as she knelt and caught up a tiny shell in her hand. Each time she looked at me, I felt a layer of myself spirited away, until I, too, was as the sea shell, miniscule within her protective hands.

"And what is your name?" She questioned.

"Nicholas."

"Nicholas," She found amusement in it and laughed. As her laughter was blown away by the gathering storm, and I found myself drawn to this 'creature of the night'. We walked, talking the morning hours away. She was well read and happy at having companionship. I found myself enchanted by her thoughts, her wit, and her quiet calmness, for in her presence, I felt an inner peace that I'd thought I'd lost forever, I felt my humanity return from some dark place.

"The sun rises soon, dear Nicholas, and I must hurry to my home. Already, I miss the goodness of your company. Say you will come again to my beach and speak to me of your travels. I would be grateful. Promise me that you will come again?"

"I will," I said and I knew it was not an idle promise. As the sun began to color the sky a pale vermillion, we parted company, each going back to our safe places.

The next night, as soon as the sun set, I made my way quickly back to the beach. Coming down the same path, to the place where we had first met, I found no one there. My heart sank as I scoured the coast up and down looking for her. The wall of skepticism and betrayal that encircled my heart grew thicker with the pain of abandonment. I cursed her existence. How easily my own darkness engulfed me, taking my humanity further away. Malimar snorted, stomping his hoofs against the wet sand, begging to run free.

"Nicholas!" a voice shouted from down the beach.

She rode as well as any man and the smile that she brought to me warmed my cold heart. She reined her dapple gray mare close to Malimar. I was delighted and drawn again by her bubbling enthusiasm and her charismatic charm.

"Where have you been? I was about to leave the county as well as the shore," I said, knowing that I would have waited in melancholy remorse for her all night.

"I could come no faster, Nicholas. I slept but a few hours today and spent the afternoon preparing for our walk. It is not often that I have company on my walks. Then, I spoke of you to my family and that was the mistake of my life. They would not let me out of their sight, until they had burdened me further." She showed me the large saddle bags that lay across the rump of her mare. She was flushed with color from her hurried trip and yet her calming affect was still present. Even Malimar, so eager to jump and run only minutes before, walked peacefully next to the mare. I looked into that face again. Those eyes that seemed to take me away to another place.

"Now tell me, sweet Angelica, what you meant. Why do you call yourself a 'creature of the night'?" I asked as she rode by my side. We rode up the beach to a sheltered cove.

"I suffer from the Red Wolf's disease, as the doctors call it," she spoke softly, seriously. "I can not live in the light of the sun, it would kill me. I become deathly ill at certain periods of my life, and perfectly fine at other times. I have grown accustomed to my illness. Yet it has made my life bittersweet, for it has given me strength of spirit, but has left a great loneliness in my heart. Who would want a woman who lives only for the night, a woman who feared to bring children into the world to be as blighted as she?"

I felt the truth in her words.

"But we must not dwell on these dismal matters, Nicholas, we must speak of life and the richness and the grandeur of each breath. Death comes soon enough." She spoke as if she had knowledge of the future.

We dismounted and she laid out a small carpet that she had lashed to her saddle.

"Is there anything you didn't think of?" I asked.

"Nothing," she replied. "I know all that I need to know of you."

"You do, do you?" I quarried. "And how is it that you are so knowledgeable?" I helped her unladen her horse.

"Life has not been too unkind. Along with my burden, I have been given a gift, the gift of perception. I see what others cannot, feel things that others never sense. I am in touch with sources that seem to flow only for me."

We stood within the moonlight, the surf playing lazily against the shore.

"What do you know of me?" I was tempted to use the Blood Tongue, the hypnotic intonation vampires were capable of, to force the truth from her lips, but something stilled my heart. "Tell me truthfully," I insisted, as I held her by the arms, looking into her wide eyes. The wind blew the hat from her head, but the ribbons around her throat held and drew my attention to her neck. Her skin so pale, her head bent back to look into my eyes, left her throat an easy mark for me. I felt her heart beat, slowly, seductively and all else faded away. The pulse of her heart became a hypnotic rhythm that would lull me into a killing frenzy.

"You are not what you think. There is great goodness in you. I have waited on this shore for years knowing you would come. You are the only man I will ever love."

"You know not what you say." I let my hands fall at my sides. Confusion filled my mind. I wanted only to run from her, to mount my horse and put miles between us. But she took my cold hands in hers and lead me to her picnic. Her smile was warm, her knowing eyes bright and alive. The blood lust was washed away from my mind by her radiant, comforting smile.

She did not set a plate for me, merely offering me a glass of wine. How could she know?

"You fear that your dark desires will cause me harm, but I tell you I have nothing to fear from you, my love."

And when she kissed my lips, I had to believe her. There was no deceit in her. Her power over me was strong. I settled down beside her on the carpet that lay on the sand. She felt so comfortable to be with, all my barriers came down and, haltingly, I spoke to her of what I was. She listened intently, calmly and then brought her lips to mine once again. Her soft warmth and sweet scent were delicious.

"We are both creatures of the night," she said, "We are different, yet the same. Do not judge yourself by your past. What you are now is what is important. You must forgive yourself. My time is short and I can not waste the moments regretting the past, nor contemplating the future. I must live now."

I felt as if I existed in the eye of a hurricane. Here at its center, with Angelica, everything was peaceful and serene. Outside, the torment and hunger of my life went by me, circling in fury and disharmony.

I took her into my arms, feeling my blood rise, my heart quickening. But this was not the hunger of my blood lust, this was the desire of my body; the normal ebb and flow of life coursing through my veins. How could this be? I was a vampire, wasn't I? Was I more than any mortal could be or was I servant to this bewitching creature?

Bathed in the moonlight, she bade me help her remove the heavy clothing she wore and, as I undressed her, she also undid the ties of my garments. I knew there was a chill in the air that night, but we did not feel it. We were totally unaware of anything outside ourselves, lost in the movement and the touching of each others' bodies. Touching, tasting, licking, the softness of the skin, the moistness of bodies intertwined in a heat too primal to be quenched by the sea breeze. She eagerly learned from my experience. But, as is the way with blissful love, soon I was her student as well.

She gave herself to me without the slightest hesitation, but I refused to rush to ecstasy. I wanted to introduce her to all the pleasures of love's play. I brought her slowly with me, as we spiraled up together towards the sweet release of spirit. And, every time I drew her up into the clouds, she lifted me higher than I had ever dreamed possible. Every movement of my body, she matched with exquisite counterpoint. It was as if we had danced this way forever and I was stunned into silence by the innocence and passion with which she filled me.

The taste of her still upon my lips, she slept in the circle of my arms. I held her tight, fearing I would wake and she would be gone.

"Enchantress, what power do you have over me?" I whispered into her ear. "How is it that you can bring the **beast** in me to lay down beside you and love you?" It was then I reached inside myself and called forth the hunger. I had to know that I could not feed upon her. My eyes glowed



golden in the waning moonlight; sharp fangs glistened so near to her fair throat. The growl that filled my throat died as it was born. She brought her fingers to my lips, drawing me to the taste of one more kiss and I could not but love her. Her magic was as willful as my blood lust. As she surrendered her body to my keeping, I gave my life over to her.

"I love you, sweet night angel. I love you with all my cold black heart. Be gentle with this soulless creature."

That very night she took me home.



Her family was delighted that a man of my obvious station and wealth was attracted to their 'peculiar' daughter. Her household, accustomed to the night activity of their mistress, was not distressed by my own unusual nocturnal behavior. If anything, I fit right in, the perfect match for their beloved Angelica. And she was so happy. I had never seen such joy in a human heart. It sprang from her soul and infected everyone within its reach, and after a somewhat shortened courtship, we were engaged to be married.

We walked her beloved beach each night, discussing the plans for our marriage and the issues of our lives. We made passionate love by the light of the moon, and none guessed that we were of one flesh. There wasn't anything that could threaten our happiness. Until I felt the malevolent presence of my father-brother, LaCroix.

He rode up to us one ill fated night. My anger towards LaCroix became uncontrollable.

"Well, dear brother, what is this news of your impending nuptials," LaCroix asked, with courtesy dripping from his corrupt mouth. "If not for the loose gossip of the townspeople, I would never have known that you had found such happiness. Pray, introduce me to your lovely fiancée."

He dismounted and came toward her. I growled a warning, and stepped between them.

LaCroix looked at her. I could sense Angelica was afraid of him as she hadn't been with me and it gave me strength.

"So, she knows what you are and still delights in you. How charming; how is it that she cheats death, Nicholas?"

I answered him with a growl, "You are not welcome here."

"Why does he call you brother, Nicholas?" she asked.

"I am as much his father as his brother, dear heart." LaCroix tried once more to approach her. "That would make you my loving daughter-in-law."

"Take one step more and I will gut your putrid flesh," I snapped.

"Temper, temper, Nicholas. I only want what's best for all concerned."

"Then leave us and never return. That would be best for all concerned," I hissed at LaCroix. "Or, by my blood, I'll kill you right now."

Smiling malevolently, he bowed before us. "I take my leave of you both. I will make myself a shadow of the night and shall not burden you with my presence ever more." He turned and mounted his blood red roan. I did not believe him. He would destroy my new found happiness, leaving disaster in his wake.

"Nicholas, he means to do you harm. Who is he and why is he filled with such evil intent toward us?" She was clearly disturbed by LaCroix.

"I am his creation, Angelica, a creation he needs to crush again and again with his depraved machinations. He wants me to become what he is, a creature of pure and unimaginable evil."

"You could never be that." She came close and sought the comfort of my arms.

"I don't know what I could become, his vileness is so pervasive, so seductive. You are the anchor that holds me just off shore. Away from the rocks that would splinter me into a thousand pieces, pieces that would be the kindling for LaCroix's hate filled fires."

We returned to Chandler house and each went to our separate rooms. She spoke no more of LaCroix. I could think of nothing else. I was up at sunset, astride Malimar. Leaving word that I had business to attend to in town, I left my apologies for Angelica and rode out seeking LaCroix. There would be no peace for us as long as LaCroix was near. Though I searched the entire evening, I could find no sign of him. Dejected by my failure to confront my demon, I returned home to find that both of Angelica's parents had died during the night. Their pale bodies were found in one another's embrace by the upstairs maid. I knew the unthinkable had happened. Upon inspecting the bodies, I found the tell-tale marks of a vampire on each of their throats. So adept a killer was LaCroix that he had extinguished one life without disturbing the sleep of the other. If only I had been there to prevent it.

Poor Angelica was overcome with grief. To lose all that she loved within a single night was hard, even for her strong spirit. I forbade her to go

anywhere alone, explaining that she was now LaCroix's next intended victim.

"He will stop at nothing, until everything is in ruins. Please, Angelica do as I bid, do not go anywhere alone. Do not leave the safety of this house."

"What safety is there, Nicholas," she cried in anguish, "When my parents met their death within these walls?"

I had no answer for her and could not meet her eyes.

"This is my doing, I should have never sought the illusion of happiness, should never have cursed you with my love," I said.

I ran from her, mounted my horse and rode into the night. As I clung to the animal's back, I urged Malimar to run at a frenzied pace. I can only surmise what transpired then. Malimar must have stepped into a hole. I heard the breaking of bones, felt the horse jerk and roll. The full weight of the beast rolled onto me and I was crushed into the hard, wet sand by the thrashing, dying animal.

For what seemed a life time, I struggled to free my broken body from Malimar's remains.

"Ah, Nicholas, what have you done to that poor horse?"

LaCroix sat astride his devil roan and watched me intently. Around him a gang of rough men hired from the streets were poised awaiting his orders.

"LaCroix, you bastard."

"You are hardly in a position for such insults," LaCroix said. "Be silent. I grow tired of your incessant attempts at reclaiming your mortality. I mean to shed a little light into your life." He looked at his men and snapped, "Do it!"

They were upon me and, in my weakened condition, I could not fend them off. I did not know what they intended, until I saw the silver spike that one of the ruffians held in his dirty hands. They dragged me to a huge tree trunk that the violent storms had washed ashore months ago. I was pushed against the massive trunk that was partially buried in the sand, and a spike was then driven through my left shoulder, pinning me to the immovable tree. I screamed in anger and pain, and raged hopelessly against the restraining metal.

"Now, Nicholas, let us see how truly immortal you really are? I must leave you now. I want to discuss your impending death with your lover. Tell me Nicholas, do you think that she can cast her spell on me?"

*LaCroix mounted his horse and rode away, taking his men with him. There was nothing I could do, trapped as I was, but wait for the sun. My death would be slow and merciless. Part of me wanted to shed tears of loss, lost love, lost hope, but vampires have no tears. So I sat in the moist sand, my body pinned against the huge tree and watched the sky slowly lighten.*

**LaCroix abandoned his slow moving men and took to the air. I knew of this because LaCroix made me painfully aware of each tiny detail when we met again decades later. He flew to Chandler House to make good his conquest of Angelica.**

**She was worried at my long absence, fearing the worst. On the roof, she occupied the Widow's Walk, looking out over the shoreline, scanning for a sign of me.**

**"Dear mistress, what furrows thy brow with such concern?" LaCroix came down beside her.**

**"You know where he is. You have left him in great danger, haven't you?"**

**"I think you should be more concerned for your own safety, dear lady, rather than worry about our Nicholas. He has a lesson to learn. I merely attempt to teach him in the most efficacious manner." He moved to encircle her in his arms. Using the 'Blood Tongue' he spoke softly to her."Perhaps, I can be of some comfort in his absence. After all, I am much more experienced in these matters."**

**"I need neither your comfort nor your care," Angelica spat back, attempting to slap his face.**

**LaCroix caught her blow, and effortlessly twisted Angelica's arm behind her, bringing her close. "So you can resist the Blood Tongue. But, no matter, you are still weak and fragile flesh that can be broken. And I have a plenty of time, dear lady, time enough and then some."**

**"What have you done with him? You are as he said, pure and unimaginable evil."**

**He brought his lips to hers and forced a kiss upon them. But he drew back from her, his face of mask of disgust. "You are tainted with death," he drew the back of his hand across his lips to wipe away her taste."Your blood is filled with it."**

**"Tell me what you've done with him, you demon!" She tore herself away from him, retreating to the far side of the walk.**

LaCroix turned toward the beach and scanned its many dunes. "Ah, the sun rises soon and, it must be a trick of the light, for I think I see my creation, like a butterfly, pinned upon the beach. His wings are soon to be singed by the approaching dawn." He began to laugh. His vision so acute he could see Nicholas as he attempted to extricate himself. "I must watch this from the shadows," he said and flew off.

Angelica strained to see and her heart froze as she finally found what she was looking for. Hurriedly, she saddled her horse and whipped the mare mercilessly towards her beloved.

I could not see her approach. She arrived with the sun. Possibly her mare bolted after coming to close to my smoking body. I only knew that the mare screamed and ran riderless down the beach. I called for Angelica, but there was no answer. Then, for what seemed like hours later, though I knew it was but a moment in time, I felt her dragging herself across me.

"Angelica, leave me. I can not free myself. I will die, go, save yourself."

Her voice sounded strange and distant.

"Nicholas, be still, I am undone."

With difficulty she dragged her body over mine as I leaned against the huge tree trunk, held fast by the silver spike. She placed herself on top of me, her long heavy petticoats and shirt protecting me from the sunlight. I drew my legs beneath me and was concealed completely from the sun by her costume. I felt her heart stop. The smell of her blood permeated the air about me. I felt my heart break inside and I cried out my agony at losing her. The sun rose and for the first time in a long time I felt the heat of day as the ambient air warmed around me. Her body grew cold and rigid above me. Fate was cruel, to give me a taste of a normal life and take it away, all in the blink of an eye. I cursed LaCroix and myself.

Mid-day went on forever. My human canopy in place, I knew that I would survive, but at what a precious cost. Finally, the shadows grew long. The cooling breezes of evening scented the air with the sea's moisture. I heard the sounds of a horse coming toward me. My body was healed now from the injury of the fall from Malimar. Only the spike itself caused me discomfort and it held me fast. Someone dismounted and walked the short distance to my side.

"Bloody, God in 'eaven." The young thug came close and pushed the body of my dead love from me.

I was as still as death, knowing what the young thug was there for, and I would make sure he got it. The youth gripped the spike, his greed would be my salvation and his own undoing. Finding he could not pull the

wretched thing from the tree; he went back to his horse and brought a mallet. He hammered at it, angling it back and forth until he loosened it from its place. Making no sound my breathing stilled, I waited. The youth pulled the spike from my shoulder. Once freed from my bondage, I rose and, taking the young man by the throat, I slowly squeezed the life from him, then I mangled and rent the body, sucking the fluid from it only as the body itself was cooling under the night sky.

Angelica was unrecognizable. Her body was swollen and disfigured by its long exposure to the sun. I lifted her and took flight. Bearing her body far out to the sea, I dropped her into the welcoming waves.

"Good bye, Angelica, sleep in the arms of your beloved sea." I turned back towards shore, back to a life of emptiness and famine, a life without hope of love, without a possibility of a real future.



Natalie brought Nick's car to a screeching halt, in the garage. Stepping quickly to the trunk she questioned him.

"Nick, how are you? Can I open the trunk?"

"Yes, Natalie, I've got it under control," he reassured her. "It's safe."

Nick's key code number let them into the elevator, and they ascended one flight to his door. Helping him to the couch, she went directly to the refrigerator. She grabbed one of the cold plastic bags that held human blood, cut the plastic tubing and began pouring the thick cool liquid into a glass of his finest crystal. She helped him to hold the glass, and Nick drank deeply.

His tortured body felt the instant revitalization of the healing fluid, as his body now had the energy to mend its many injuries. He drained the glass and held it out for more.

Quickly, she refilled the glass and watched in wonder as his flesh melted back to wholeness. After he had drunk more than five pints of human blood, Nick again had a rosy glow to his cheeks and most outward signs of injury were gone.

"I think I can make it to bed, Natalie, if you'll help me."

"It's amazing that you're alive at all, Nick," she said.

Together, they made it up the stairs and into his bedroom. She eased him onto the bed. The blood red, satin sheets were cool, clean and Nick welcomed their familiar feel. With the efficiency and detachment of the head of forensic pathology, she helped him to undress and covered him



over with the thin clinging top sheet, then sat on the edge of the bed next to him.

She felt aroused just sitting near him as he lay in bed, even though she knew that nearness was dangerous. He had fed well, but any strong emotion that consumed him could also bring the desire to feed again.

There was a moment of dreaded silence. Nick felt her heart beat resonating against his sensitive skin. Her wide eyes did not look upon him with fear or disgust. He looked into those eyes and she cast her gaze down into her lap.

"I guess I should go." Then looking straight at him, because it was hard not to, she said, "Are you going to be all right by yourself?"

He wanted to say, *please, stay with me*, but he couldn't find the courage. His eyes filled with pain. He thought back on all the long years of his aloneness. Each night was a taste of hell. He always awoke to the reality of his solitary bed. How he longed to wake and find someone there, lying next to him, each evening at sunset. His heart froze. *Why should she put her life in jeopardy, just because he was dying inside with a desperate longing for her?*

Looking upon his boyish features, she saw the terrible struggle that consumed him. She saw his pain, the aching loneliness and longing that he had no way of concealing. How could she leave him? She made her decision and answered her own question.

"I'd better stay. You shouldn't be alone after such an ordeal. Nick, do you have something I could wear. I didn't exactly come prepared for this," she said changing the subject.

"Over there in that bureau," he indicated with his hand.

She went to the black lacquer bureau. Opening a door, she rummaged around and pulled out a silk pajama top.

"I'll be right back," she said as she ducked out the door and down to the main level. He heard the refrigerator open, then her foot steps on the stairs. She brought a bottle of blood up and placed it on the bedside stand, where he could reach it.

"Just in case you need more, we won't have to run downstairs for it," she said.

"Thanks," he returned. He gave her his best smile and felt shaky inside, not believing that this was really happening. How could he do this to her, to himself? Yes, he'd just finished feeding on human blood, but wouldn't that just release the beast more quickly?

Once again, she exited from the bedroom. This time she went to the bathroom and was there for many minutes. When she came out, she was wearing the pajama top, which was oversized on her smaller frame. Her hair was pulled back and she carried her clothes in a neat pile over her left arm. She put everything down on the bench at the foot of the bed and came back to sit down next to Nick, facing him.

"I don't know if I can just drop off to sleep, I still have enough adrenaline in me to power most of the street lights in Toronto," she said with her usual dry wit. She took a deep breath and Nick could see the weariness around her eyes, and a touch of caution that wasn't usually there. He knew that what he asked of her was her life.

"Nat, I don't know how I'll ever repay you," he started not daring to look straight into her eyes.

"Listen, Nick, I can't have the vampire in my life vaporizing out of existence," she said jokingly, the way she always couched her true feelings. "I don't know what I'd do without you." It must have been the weariness that let her lips speak the truth. An awkward moment passed between them again.

Nick drew her close. She was inches from him.

"I was worried about you, Nick." She reached out and played with an errant lock of his hair. And this time, not like the first time she had reached out to him, he welcomed the caress, taking her hand and holding it against his cold cheek. How he had longed for her touch.

"Your life seems filled with sadness, too much sadness." How could she speak of her love for him, how could she not? *There aren't really too many tomorrows, not for me.*

Taking courage into her heart she said, "Nick, I love you. I couldn't bear to lose you."

He smiled his little boy smile and drew himself about her, laying his head upon her lap.

"All these years that we have been friends, I have loved you, Natalie. Fearing to speak of my love; a vampire's love."

He could feel her heart pounding, the blood racing in her fragile arteries. His own heart beat wanted to match hers and he fought against the hunger. He drew away from her. She saw the gold of his eyes, the sharpness of fangs. Struggling with the desire to feed, Nick withdrew further. He covered his face with his hands, wanting to stop the urges that

consumed him. Then he felt warm hands pulling his down and around her waist.

"Don't be afraid, I'm not afraid. I know the hunger is hard to bear, but we'll work through it. You have to know that I trust you, love you."

"How can you trust me, when I can't even trust myself?"

She took his face into her hands.

"Well, you haven't eaten the messenger, yet." She said jokingly, putting special emphasis on the 'yet.'

He had to laugh at her turn of phrase.

"And just what is the message?" He asked lightheartedly.

"That I will not cease in my efforts to bring you back over. Somehow, together we will find a cure for your curse. You have to believe that, believe in me."

His eyes sparkled with merriment and their greenness was a welcome sight.

"But I really would like to eat the messenger," he said as he bit into the front of her pajama top and sent her giggling and grasping at his head.

"Stop," she begged. Turning and attempting to roll away from him. "I surrender. Please, stop."

The dark moment was now alive with playful laughter. He only growled and pulled her down to him. So she kissed him and he filled her with his kiss. The coolness of his body engulfed her. It was a sensation different from anything she had ever known. It was totally exciting.

All this time Nick had a continuous inner dialogue with his beast. He didn't try to control it, but to integrate it into his 'human' side.

She had hungered so long for his kisses that, when they were finally upon her lips, she trembled with delight. Nick answered her erotic tremors with longer, languid kisses and cool, sweet caresses covering all her points of pleasure. Touching him with her hot mortal fire, his human passions came alive once more. He reveled in the taste of her and touched her everywhere with his tongue. Nibbling at her body, teasing and titillating her skin with the sharpness of his fangs. She devoured his body with kisses and pleasures that he'd denied himself for long lifetimes. He was a vampire loving a mortal woman and he could not believe that it was happening.

Their love play went on for what seemed like forever. He used the aching slowness of the truly experienced lover, who knows the wanting is so much more seductive than the having. His eyes turned a brilliant, fire-gold. His fangs, sharp and hungry, moved toward her soft throat. He bent her head away from him and licked the gentle curve of her neck. The cold roughness of his tongue brought her out of her euphoric sexual state and back to the reality of the situation. Nick would soon be out of control. His carnivorous breathing was sharp and strong. He'd kill now without hesitation. She had to try to resist his seduction, or he would indeed 'eat the messenger. '

"Nick," she pulled away from him. "Nick," she said in her best playful tone, "I don't think I can survive your vampire version of *necking*."

She started to laugh and Nick had to join her. He brought Natalie back into his arms, his hunger was washed away by their combined laughter. He hugged her to him and felt such a sense of accomplishment and relief that she still lived.

"You're alive!" His joy was triumphant.

"Yeah, we made it a step closer," she said with a happy, seductive smile on her lips. "Maybe you can eat the messenger next time," she said, hugging him closer to her.

"Oh, I hope so," he said, stroking her hair and kissing her cheek.

She held his cold body within the warmth of her arms, talking of nothing and everything, until she fell asleep. He sighed in deep contentment, knowing that this evening, unlike all the rest in his endless lifetime, he would wake to find her beside him. Taking her into his arms, in a gentle, yet firm embrace, (he would leave nothing to chance), he kissed her again.

Nick looked over at the painting displayed on the stand near his bed. The painting that had nearly killed him, but, miraculously, had finally given Natalie and him the courage to attempt a loving relationship. Angelica smiled at him. Her vibrant love for life, and for him, came back to him through the long years.

"Thank you," he whispered to her, hoping she had heard, then he, too, let Morpheus embrace him.



# The Swan

By: Todd Parrish

The sounds of the theater died away, leaving Nicholas in silence with his thoughts. The body of his swan-like dancer lay before him, her skin pale, the blush of her cheeks drained. So frail she looked, so innocent. LaCroix said she was a whore. Nicholas had believed his chicanery. He'd taken the young flower in his powerful arms and sunk his fangs into her flesh. The hunger coupled with this unanswered question: how could purity tolerate evil, had drawn him like a moth to the flame. So many years of his damnable code to only take from criminals, the wrongdoers, had been broken. he was a **beast** damned to the darkness forever!

"LaCroix, I shall see you in hell," he vowed. The love he held for the dancer had made him strong, yet left him devastated. "She was innocent," he whispered caressing her cheek and wishing he could weep. *Its too late now, isn't it Nicholas*, he condemned himself.

He recalled the events that lead up to her demise.

"She's a whore. . . sometimes she even takes two at a time." LaCroix had smiled. His words came back to haunt Nick.

"You're a filthy liar!" He protested against his master's insinuation.

How could he have believed LaCroix's evidence--two gentlemen in top hats leaving her dressing room? He must have been mad to have entertained the thought. Not her virtue--if anything they had stolen some precious bauble. He'd rushed in, to prove to himself that the accusations were untrue. There his angel sat, her face illuminated with feminine warmth he had not known in centuries.

He went to her, attempted to kiss her hand, but drew away because he felt unworthy. He murmured that he wanted to make sure that she was unharmed. She seemed so fragile, like spun glass sitting in her dressing room chair. When she spoke his name, he thought his immortal heart would stop beating. Oh, wish that it could have!

She asked him if he loved the ballet. He revealed that he loved to watch her dance. She called him by name. She must have recognized him from all the performances he'd attended and his spirit soared. It was like she had reached out and touched some secret place inside, making hem believe that despite his innumerable crimes he was worthy of her somehow. He was overcome. he didn't want to taint her with his

ugliness. his long dead flesh, and his desire for her blood, so he turned away.

"Don't go," she begged.

*Woman you knew not what you wished for! It was your death you invited to stay!*

He could hear himself answer, knew what the outcome must be. "I will never see you again," he vowed.

"Please, stay," she again prompted.

He didn't want to go. He wanted to feel her in his arms, declare his love, and have her understand. He imagined her holding him in her arms and forgiving him his past. *What farce!* He believed in that moment she could make him something other than what he was. He only **wanted** to believe it. In that moment the fantasy seemed real. Perhaps her purity could make him not lust after blood, make him not smell it like a perfume which clung to mortal flesh. She could redeem him, cleanse him, baptize him with her glory.

Her lips came to him like sweetest honey. It was as if he had kissed the face of god. He turned away, confused, shaken. "No."

"Why?" she questioned, her brow wrinkled in bewilderment. Naiveté.

She bid him to kiss her again. He couldn't believe it.

"I love you," she stated. "Yes, Nicholas. I've been watching you as you've been watching me, knowing it would come to this someday."

He shook his head. *How? Impossible.* "Don't love me. How can you?" he whispered.

"The same way you do." For her, things had been simple. Out of the mouths of babes, yet, he learned noting in his quest for humanity. She truly didn't understand his nature. How could she?

"It's not possible. It isn't," he argued.

"It is more than possible, it is the truth." Her eyes shone like blue diamonds. her lips fluttered like rose petals in a late summer breeze.

Truth? What was the truth? She would rot in the earth with worms eating her flesh, and he would go on for an eternity taking lives. Truth.

"How can you be anything but repulsed by me?" Accusation. He knew that he was unworthy. How could she love him? Couldn't the pure of heart see into hearts and reveal the evil that lurked there?



"Purity cannot tolerate evil." He dared her to deny it. "How can you it love evil. . . unless it **isn't** purity?" In a flash of misguided insight, he'd reached the conclusion that would absolve him of her murder. His damnable code again: kill only the guilty. By what right did he presume to judge who would live and who would die, anyway? Had his thinking become so jaded that he believed he had the right to take her life if she **were** guilty. It seemed enough for the moment.

"No." she muttered, seeming surprised at his change in mood.

She admitted her guilt, agreed with his decision. he knew now it was her way of telling him that she didn't believe him wicked in any way.

She kissed him again, and he held her head in his hands. Yes! She was fragile. With the strength of those hands he could have snapped her neck. As he returned her caress, the hunger inside escaped. Like a wild animal it ran free and he felt the beast awaken.

"The I will **take** you!" he grimaced. Such feeling of power engulfed him, washed him away in a tide of lust. Excuses, and rationalizations, were his playthings. He could not see it then.

He slipped her cloak down around her shoulders, exposing her long, white neck. His incisors formed, long and sharp as a snarl issued from his throat. He turned her neck to one side, and in a moment of passionate murder, he dug his teeth into her and relished it. In that split second, is madness, his longing for redemption were washed away by the blood and the need. There was only the need. The clarity of it was irrefutable.

But, it was not the swan who died that night, it was Nicholas' soul. How could there be redemption for a crime so heinous?

She lay on the dressing room's multicolored carpet, her head lolling back exposing the wounds he'd inflicted. LaCroix had entered the room triumphant, the girl's two "gentlemen callers" in tow.

"It worked. We have our Nicholas back again," he smirked.

There was the truth at last. She was innocent, in love. LaCroix had betrayed him. "I hate you!" Nicholas growled at his elder. The swan lay between the two adversaries, her body peaceful on the old carpet, pierced by two arrows.

Nicholas lifted her head and cradled her in his arms. LaCroix exited the room, leaving Nicholas desolate save for his guilt for company, which ached in a way he thought impossible. Centuries had not dulled it. It went on and on. He wished it were as simple as taking a life to ride himself of the guilt.

Alone with his thoughts. he ran his hands over her supple neck. A droplet of blood glistened on his fingertip. Instinctively, he put it in his mouth and tasted it. It ran over his tongue, making it come alive. Like nectar it was. Like swill which polluted his soul. Damn it! Damn that life-giving fount which turned him into the beast that he was.

Is this what eternity was meant for? Will it go on and on without end? Was he meant to continue taking? Did it matter whether guilt or innocence played a part in murder? Were such things an illusion of the mind, as was the drama he'd staged with this now dead dancer? LaCroix's trick showed him the error of his ways. Killing was killing whether it was the innocent or the guilty.

"I am the monster. I know that now." He kissed the girl's cheek. *I must accept my actions. No more games. No more performances for my benefit. Let the curtain come down. LaCroix your influence has ended.*

"I promise you my little swan," he sobbed tearless into her silken hair, "Like the ugly duckling, I will no longer be ugly. I will find a way to turn my nature. I will deny it. And like the hero in that story, perhaps, someday, I too can become a swan."

The theater was empty. Silence remained, yet the silence which brought Nick no solace. He gathered the dancer in his arms and went to the window. Opening it, he willed himself into the dark heavens, over Paris, towards the cemetery where he would find a crypt in which to lay her to rest. Perhaps her purity had redeemed his soul after all.



# *The Night Calls My Name*

By: Star Urioste

Don Schanke waited in the Cadillac for his partner. Don was the consummate aging hippie. His long, thick side burns really dated him. His spare tire and receding hair line confirmed his over forty status. At this moment he was plotting revenge on his youthful partner, Nick Knight. Schanke was really tired of Nick abandoning both him and the car in the middle of things. Not too long ago he'd just jetted out of the Caddie and climbed all over a moving bus, because he thought he saw a female perp from a prior case. He'd ribbed Nick about that for weeks. But now Schanke thought that he had come up with something that was a real zinger to get Nick back for all the times he'd left him in the lurch.

Nick Knight slid into the car, pulled his seat belt on and fired up the engine.

"Okay, Schank, I've got the work address of our suspect and we're heading out to pick him up."

"Great," Don said. "Let's hope he's there, so we can wrap this up early."

Schanke was the PM man, his shift overlapping the day shift and Nick's night shift. He liked his job and he considered himself lucky that he had a good partner in Nick. Schanke had actually been pretty lucky with both his partners. Jimmy, his first partner, had been a real piece of work. And, though he was a little strange, Nick was a decent, good guy. Yeah, he'd been really lucky. Some of the guys on his shift were constantly grumbling about their partners. He had no complaints, except when Nick left him high and dry. But he'd take care of that pronto.

They arrived at the Continental Can Company at about eight thirty to pick up Marshall Laird. He was wanted for questioning in the death of Sandra Malone, his one time girlfriend. They found the foreman, who took them to where Laird was working. The Can manufacturing factory was so noisy, that Schank joked it was, 'enough to wake the dead'. You had to be right on top of someone and still yell to be heard.

As the three turned a corner and came within sight of him, the foreman pointed to Laird. Laird had on ear protection, but the minute he saw the two strangers coming toward him, he bolted. Nick and Schanke drew their guns and pursued him, but lost him in the maze of machinery on the ground floor.

Nick yelled for the foreman to call for back up. Then they both could concentrate on catching the perp.

"Let's split up," Nick yelled at Schanke "I'll stay down here, you go up one level and see if you can flush him out."

"Okay." Don yelled back, "Be careful Nick, we don't know if he's armed."

They parted and Don bounded up a nearby stairway and crept along the upper level catwalk that looked down on the ground floor. It wasn't long before he spotted the perp sneaking up behind Nick, with a gun in his hand.

"Nick, look out!" Schanke yelled at the top of his lungs.

Nick's acute vampire hearing caught his name, but the sound echoed from so many directions that he couldn't tell where Schanke was, or what he was saying. He spun around looking for his partner. Schanke ran until he was just above Knight and Laird. He could see that Laird had Nick in his sights. Schanke aimed for Laird and pulled the trigger, but his gun jammed.

"Damn," Schanke said to himself and hurled his large frame over the side of the railing towards Nick.

He landed just as the gun went off and deflected Nick away from the line of fire.

Nick was up and after Laird in an instant, his inhuman strength and speed let him catch the guy with ease. He disarmed the perp, handcuffed him to a huge piece of machinery and returned to Schanke. *Schanke, you're getting too old to be playing Tarzan on me.* As he came within range, he still couldn't see Schanke, but there was a crowd of people clustered in the area where he'd jumped. Suddenly, all the machinery in the plant shut down at once. The silence was overwhelming and Nick was now right over Schanke. The officer lay in a large pool of his own blood. His eyes were open, but vacant, his breathing shallow and slow.

"Schanke?" Nick fought the urge to lift his partner up and hold him, as he knelt by his side. He took a clean handkerchief from his jacket pocket and held it over the gaping wound in Schanke's head. Applying pressure, he found that the copious amounts of blood weren't making him feel the vampire hunger. His mind was too numb with anxiety. Schanke's eyes stared into space and Nick felt that they were staring directly at him.

"Schanke?" he spoke directly into Don's ear, trying to illicit some response. He felt Schank's blood pressure dropping and his heart was missing beats.

"Has anyone called for an ambulance?" Nick asked urgently.

"We got one coming," the foreman said.

Nick returned his full attention to Schanke.

"Hang on, Don," he said. Far off in the distance he could hear an approaching siren. With each heart beat, Schanke's vital signs dipped a fraction more. Nick put his hand over Don's heart and in the 'Blood Tongue', he said.

"You will hold on."



It seemed like decades before his backup arrived and took the perp downtown. The on site reports had to be initiated and statements from witnesses gathered. Knowing that he needed to go, everyone helped to speed the process. But, it still seemed to take forever. Finally, free of his duties, he left the Caddie in the parking lot of the cannery and took to the sky. Landing on the hospital roof, he entered the emergency stairway. He stepped over the railing of the stairwell and dropped down to the appropriate floor. Luckily, there was no one there to see him. It wouldn't have mattered to him if there had been. All he cared about now was Schanke.

He got to the waiting room and found Natalie there.

"Have they notified Myra?" Nick asked.

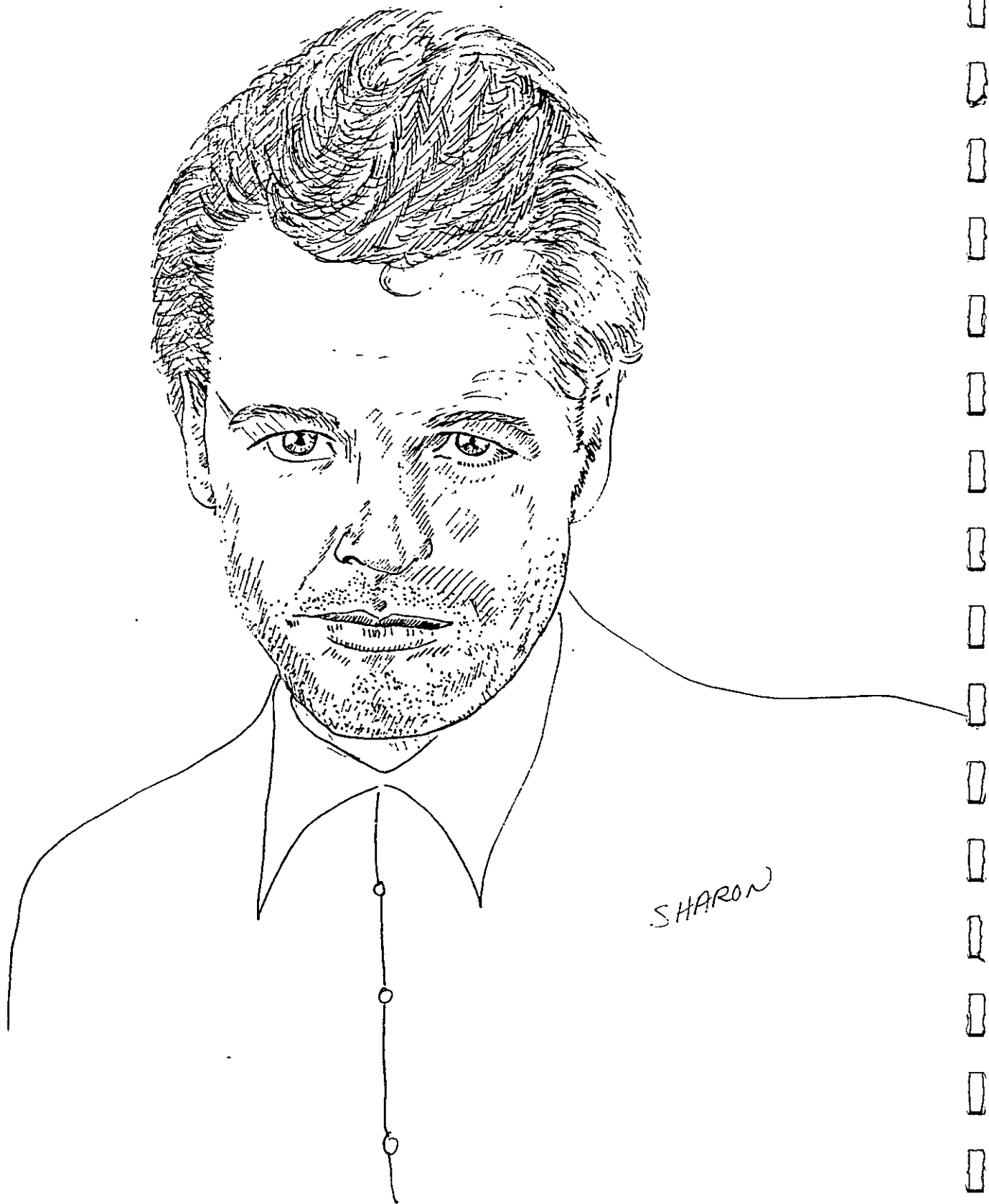
"She's in Tampa with her mother, you know her mother's been ill on and off for the last year or so," Nat said. "Stonetree left a message for her to call him as soon as she could."

Nick let out a sigh of utter frustration.

"Myra doesn't need this right now," he said, a little self contempt rising in his voice.

"What happened?" Nat asked. She'd only gotten bits and pieces of the story from other officers.

"We went to pick up a suspect at the Can company on Newhurst. He spotted us and rabbited. We called for backup, then pursued him. From what I can piece together, Schanke was on the catwalk above and saw that the perp was about to fire on me. Schanke tried to get a shot off at the perp, but his gun jammed. So, he jumped over the railing and took the bullet meant for me."



Nat could see that Nick was taking this pretty hard. She put her arms around him and held him close. He clung to her with his powerful embrace and buried his face in her long hair. He stayed there for the longest time. She just stood and held him, not knowing what else to do. There wasn't too much else that either of them could do for Don and she knew how much Nick needed her right now. Schanke was an important part of Nick's extended mortal family. Though they often bickered and quarreled, Nat knew that a deep admiration and love for one another existed between them.

They remained in the softly lit waiting room for several hours. Doctor Marcus came out a little past one AM. His face was drawn and his body language told them he was exhausted. Nick stood at his approach, but Nat dragged him back down by her side. She'd lived through these tragedies before and sensed the worst had happened.

"We've stabilized him, but he's comatose. You have to know, I don't think he'll ever come out of the coma. The bullet did too much damage. I'm sorry."

"Can we see him?" Nick asked.

"He's in the recovery room now. Why don't you wait and come back in the morning. I'd feel better about you seeing him then."

The irony of a morning visit was lost on the doctor, but Nat could see something inside Nick break. He leapt to his feet and ran from the room and down the corridor.

"They are very close," she said in excuse to the doctor and chased after Nick.

The doctor only nodded his head, he understood only too well.

Nick was running blindly, he made it to an exit leading to the outside of the building and flung the door open.

Nat came after, running hard to catch up with him.

"Nick! Nick, wait!" She pleaded with the fleeing figure. She just made it to his side as he was taking off. Grabbing his pant leg she pulled with all her strength. He relented and floated down beside her. Self-consciously she looked around, praying that no one had seen him try to leap into flight from the fourth floor.

"Don't do this, Nick," she wanted to be angry with him but couldn't find it in her heart. "You're being careless. Don put his life on the line for

you. It was his decision, you can't change that. You can't change anything about this whole situation. You've got to accept it and go on from here."

Nick looked at her, incredible pain raged within his sky blue eyes. He gripped her shoulders and the weight of his stare pressed down upon her.

"Nat, that bullet was meant for me. I could have taken that shot point blank and survived."

"Don didn't know that."

"I should have told him long ago. I should have trusted him with my secret. He would have understood. I could have prevented all of this with just a few words. He didn't have to get shot. If he had known I am immortal, he could have concentrated on nabbing the perp, instead of trying to save my skin. It's my fault he's in this hospital, that he'll never wake up again. I've condemned him to this non-existence, just as I've condemned myself."

"That's not true," she countered.

"Nat, you know it's true. You know it even more than I. My silence condemned Don Schanke, my inability to speak the truth to someone I cared for. I might just as well have pulled the trigger myself."

With that he turned and lifted off and into the black night, his dark clothing concealing his passage. Nat stood alone on the stairway and cried. Not for Don, but for Nick, because she knew that he hadn't the ability to cry any more. Someone had to cry for Nick.



Nick flew home, oblivious to everything. There was no comfort in his comfortable surroundings. All he could think of was Schank. He could see Schanke lying in a pool of his own blood, blood that made Nick feel sick not hungry. Nick felt an emptiness that now would never be filled again. Schanke was gone, forever. He wanted more than ever to cry, to feel the hot tears flow down his cheeks, but that wouldn't happen. Vampires could shed only blood tears and then only in times of extreme duress. Though his heart ached in remorse and guilt, he could not bring one tear to shed for Schanke.

He took five pints of human blood from the refrigerator and stuffed them into the pockets of his rain coat. Then, going back to the roof of his warehouse, he once again took to the air, flying westward, trying to hold on to the night for as long as he could. It began to rain, and, as the rain drops touched his fair cheeks, he remembered a time so very long ago. The rain was falling then, too, that time of first betrayal.





They rode side by side through the heavy winter rains. Merlo and Nicholas were drenched and cold. Their strong mounts were weary from troding through miles and miles of thick mud. Merlo was as darkly handsome as Nicholas was fair and light and he was the elder of the two. Even now that Nicholas was mature and strong, still Merlo looked after him. They were headed toward Brabant after coming home from the Crusades.

"The Hart's Blood Inn is no more than a mile or two before us, Nicholas. We'll stop there and rest these poor beasts. My body cries out for the comfort of a warm bed on this cold night."

"How are the lilacs and the roses here, the lilies of the field?" Nicholas smiled with youthful exuberance. Merlo knew instantly of what he spoke. For, with the beauty of his face, Nicholas was the terror of the female populace. His good looks and charm had brought him many a conquest between the sheets.

"Look you to other pursuits," Merlo admonished him. "I will not be going from bed to bed rescuing your miserable hide from half the women in the world. Learn some abstinence, Nicholas, foolish pleasures are not half as rewarding as love's full kiss."

"You should speak," Nicholas said. "Women would spirit you away in their lust for your love. Why do you turn a deaf ear to their desire?"

"I grow weary of the pursuit, Nicholas, I know that somewhere in this world a woman worthy of my love exists."

"You waste the bounty of your seed, Merlo. So many flowers seek to bloom beneath us. We can sip from every delicate petal, you and I, forever." Nicholas' laughter filled the twilight as the two pushed on.

They arrived at the inn just after dark. They bedded their horses and had a warm meal. Throughout the evening, a woman of dark beauty hovered near their table, smiling and casting long glances at the two handsome men.

"She is bold, isn't she," Nicholas smiled lustfully at her. Merlo was not so captivated by her generous attention.

"She is beautiful, Nicholas, but I am weary from the long ride. The only thing I desire tonight is a soft warm bed.

"That sounds good to me," Nicholas replied as the raven haired maiden advanced toward them and filled their cups from her pitcher.

Saying nothing, she retreated to another table and relinquished the pitcher to the regular bar maid.

"I leave you to the night, Nicholas," Merlo sighed heavily. Knowing that he could offer nothing quite as tempting to Nicholas as the promise she gave with her smile, he stood and excused himself.

The fireplace in their room was filled with huge logs, the warmth welcoming. Merlo spent a few hours reading before he went to bed. He awoke to find Nicholas' bed was cold and empty. Shaking his head in consternation, he rose and readied himself for another day. After breaking his fast, he inquired about Nicholas.

"Innkeeper, might you know where my young companion is?"

"Nay, sir, the pup left here last night with the dark lady. They be straining the sheets of some lusty bed, I warrant." the keeper said giving a wink and smile.

"Do you know the ladie's name perchance?"

"I think he called her Janette," he said.

Merlo took leave of the inn and scoured the town hoping for word of Nicholas. Evening caught up to him and there was still no sign. Merlo began to worry now, for it was not like Nicholas to be so late, nor so inconsiderate. He usually left word, at least, that his tryst was too much to leave and he would be in touch soon. That night Merlo slept fitfully. He swore on the sword of his father that, when he found Nicholas, he would beat some sense and responsibility into him. When he woke and there was still no word, Merlo knew that some mischief had befallen Nicholas. This behavior was not like him at all. He waited another day and a night, hoping that Nicholas would turn up, perhaps the wiser for his exploits. He grew more and more concerned.

So, on the third day, he retrieved his horse from the livery and asked questions all around the village of the woman Janette.

"There be a comely woman, dark she be and mysterious, m' lord." the peasant woman said. "Don't member that I heard her name tho."

"Where does she reside, good woman?"

"Seen 'er at Brayman's tower to the north of the village. An abandoned hall, a place of evil, sir. Don't be goin' there by yerself."

He thanked her and followed the path that lead to Brayman's tower. From the outside, it appeared unoccupied, but inside candles were lit and tapestries hung.

"Hello, the house," he called, as he entered the unlocked door. Then, he saw her from the corner of his eye. Running after her, he caught her slender figure in his strong arms.

"Where is he, woman, don't lie to me either. I'll have the truth or your life will be forfeit." He drew his small dagger and held it close to her delicate throat.

"Don't hurt me, my lord," she begged. "The one you seek is here, within the rooms that are to the rear of this hall."

"Take me to him." Merlo commanded. Willingly, Janette took up a candle from those that were lit and guided him into the deep darkness of the house. She appeared nervous and she looked about, as if she were concerned for some other intrusion. So, Merlo remained watchful, his dagger ready.

They entered a black room. In a far corner, Nicholas lay in a bed of luxurious silk and satins. His face was sweet and composed, his hands lay across his heart as if, even in sleep, he strove to protect it. Sheathing his dagger, Merlo drew his glove from his left hand and touched Nicholas' face. It was icy cold.

"Nicholas," he whispered, as he shook the still figure in an attempt to waken him.

"Please, my lord, you can not wake him from this sleep. Leave him now and go from this place. He is lost to you. His fate is sealed and he belongs to another." Her eyes were cold and the fear she had counterfeited before was now gone.

"What have you done to him? What enchantment have you brought down upon him? Undo what you have done, witch."

"She has done nothing but seduce a lover to her bed." A voice penetrated the darkness and Merlo whirled and drew his sword in one motion.

"Who are you?"

"I am LaCroix, Nicholas' new master. He serves me now and no other."

"He serves no one." Merlo said and he stepped back to Nicholas' side trying once again to rouse him.

"Even now his body changes. He is my finest creation; a perfect companion for the rest of eternity."

"I am taking him from this place," Merlo said.

"You are a part of this play, I see that now," LaCroix said ingenuously.

Merlo lunged at LaCroix, who grabbed the sharp blade in his bare hand, yanked it from the knight's grip, and threw it against the stone floor. LaCroix advanced on Merlo. His voice, seductive and mesmerizing, was not to be denied.

"Sleep the sleep of the damned," he said.



Nicholas woke from his dreamless sleep, he looked around anxiously for LaCroix. He always woke with such a monstrous hunger, an unquenchable thirst.

"I am hungry, I must feed." Nicholas looked expectantly at LaCroix. Like a young animal seeking food from its parent, he had no other thought, but his own continuance.

"Yes, I know, I have provided for you Nicholas. There upon the platform, as always, your evening meal awaits you. Go, drink your fill, end your insatiable hunger. Each night you will be stronger, until the time comes when you will hunt and feed on your own."

Nicholas looked to the raised platform in the center of the room. In the dim light he could see the outline of a human resting thereon. Every night, a new body inhabited the raised dais. As he approached, he could feel the heart beating only for him. He could smell the scent of blood and feel it throbbing in the artery beneath his touch. It excited him and he bit into the yielding flesh. The surge of blood in his mouth sent him into a frenzy. He bit deeper, rending the flesh and drained the vital fluid, until none remained. An ecstasy engulfed him and he reeled in satiated pleasure. Slipping to the floor, blood dripping from his open mouth, he felt cold steel at his finger tips. There, beneath his hand was his father's sword.

"No!" Nicholas screamed in agony, as he dragged himself back to the platform. Pulling a candle from its niche near the dais, he turned the face of his latest victim into the soft light. The face he looked into was his own, only darker and older and more dead than ever he had hoped to see it. Merlo, his friend and companion since the beginning of his life; his loving and much loved brother, he had been Nicholas' dark feast.

"No," he breathed in unbelieving sorrow and pain. "God, in heaven..." he started to cry out.

"There is no god in your heaven, now Nicholas. In point of fact, there is no heaven for you anymore, only the darkness and the cold, the dying and the dead. That is our existence, all that we shall ever know."

Nicholas threw the burning candle at LaCroix. His eyes were hollow and dry. He ran from his mentor, into the night, the winter rain falling in huge drops against his cold skin. He ran until he fell in an exhausted heap onto the rain soaked ground. The cold rain trickled down his cheeks and something inside him was forever broken. Something that LaCroix would never be able to control or manipulate again throughout eternity.



The approaching daylight startled him back into the present and he found refuge in the sepulcher of a long forgotten and ancient graveyard. His clothes were soaked, but the chill of the dark chamber did not touch his cold heart. He drank deeply from the bags of blood he had stuffed into his pockets. When he had gorged himself on the life force within the fluid, he succumbed to a satiated stupor and was as close to oblivion as a vampire is likely to get. But, in the end, the high wears off, the altered state of mind returns to the present. The addict must seek another fix or look for that final fix, the one that lasts forever.

Nick came back to reality, he came back hard and he knew what he had to do. There was no other way. He lifted himself up from the floor of the sepulcher and looked through the rusting, broken gate to the outside world. The sun was setting. Now was the time for action. Soon, there would be an end of betrayal, an end to hope. The final moments in a haunted life would be at hand.



Natalie was at the morgue. Burying herself in her work seemed the only relief from the pain. Nick had disappeared; she'd given up looking for him. Myra was on her way home with Jenny and there was no change in Schanke's condition. She found herself just going through the motions of work. Needing to see Don again, she made excuses and got people to cover for her.

Arriving on his hospital floor, she found everyone was in an uproar.

"What's the problem?" Nat asked of one of the evening cleaning ladies.

"Someone kidnapped one of the patients," she said.

"Kidnapped?"

"Yeah. The guy had been shot in the head, he couldn't have left on his own."

"Nick." Natalie whispered to herself, as she turned and went immediately to the nearest elevator.



Nick lay Schanke gently on his leather couch. The hospital blankets, in which he had wrapped him, he now tucked around Don's body as he sat on the floor next to his friend. With the remote in his hand, he opened up all the windows, letting in the moon light. He laid the remote at his feet and clutched Schanke's hand, knowing bitterly that Schanke would never return his touch.

"I'm sorry Schank, I should have told you long ago that I'm a vampire. I can't die. You didn't have to cover my ass. You didn't have to worry about me." He pressed his forehead to Schanke's hand and felt the warm, gentle pulse of Schanke's heart beating. It was comforting, somehow.

"Don't worry, my friend," Nick said looking up, "you will not suffer this deathlessness. I will take what is left of your life, before the sunlight takes mine."

Nick looked at the face of his friend and partner, and remembered Merlo, his best friend and brother. He'd betrayed them both. His life seemed to be one loss after another. Each failed attempt to find peace, happiness and friendship had brought him to this final decision.

"The night calls my name, Schank. Each night, for lifetime after lifetime, it has called me. And, every time I try to answer, I find that I have lost a fragment of myself, until there's nothing left; no reason to continue, no hope of redemption, no hand to reach out to mine. I would give my life, if it would bring you back. I'd do it in a second just to see your crooked smile, to hear the sound of your voice nagging me to death."

"Then why don't you?" Natalie closed the massive door to Nick's warehouse flat. So focused on Schanke had he been, that he hadn't heard the huge door as she had muscled it open.

"I'm a vampire, Nat. I can't turn back time or make the damage the bullet did go away."

"Maybe you can," Nat said.

"How do you figure that?"

"Not too long ago, one of your old companions proved that being injected with the blood of a vampire was not the same as being bitten by

one. Her victims were not brought over, nor did they suffer the same effects as you do. They fought the process of aging and they succeeded, but only for brief periods of time. We know that vampire blood has rejuvenating properties, why not healing properties? We just don't know what the dosage is. How much would it take and how long would it last?

"So you're proposing that a transfusion of my blood would heal his injuries?"

"Yes, but we don't know exactly how much blood we're talking about here. Remember, Dr. Jurgen was only using a tiny amount. Schanke has massive head trauma, brain tissue damage, edema, nerve damage. It may take more than you have to give."

"It's a long shot, but we've believed in long shots before, haven't we?" There was a positiveness in his demeanor that hadn't been there before.

"Then shut the blinds and carry Schank up to your bed. We'll need the extra room up there."

She made no mention of his intended suicide, merely dismissed his actions as unacceptable and moved on with her own plans.

"Thanks, Nat."

"For...?"

"For saving two lives."

"Someone has to do the thinking around here," she said a bit sarcastically, as she went up the stairs ahead of him. "Besides, it's only midnight, you would probably have come up with something before sunrise."

He didn't argue with her, but he knew he owed her again. It was the second time, since he'd met her, that she had saved his life.

Nick placed Don on the left side of the bed and lay down on the right. Nat removed the equipment she had "borrowed" from the hospital.

"Do you know, off hand, how much blood you can lose?"

"I don't know. Most of the time, when I'm severely injured, my blood is absorbed back into my body of it's own accord."

"Humm. That may be to our advantage."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if your blood always seeks to return to your body, then I will pump the necessary blood into Don's body; let it do its healing, then just leave the IV passage open and in a neutral position and let the your blood push it's way back into your body."

"There's no way his heart could start pumping his blood into my body?" Nick asked.

"No. The neutral position will hold both circulatory systems apart. Only the natural tendency of your blood to cross any barrier to return to you will it allow it to force its way through the shunt."

"Let's try it, but, promise me one thing Nat."

"What?"

"That you won't stop the transfusion for any reason. Give Schanke's life priority over mine."

Natalie looked at Nick, her heart wrenching inside her.

"Nick, I can't do that. We're on unexplored ground here. I will do all that I can to see that both you and Schanke come out of this okay? Alright?"

"I guess that's all I can ask," he said.

Nat set up shop on the bed. She followed normal sterile technique and connected Nick directly to Schanke through an IV tube which had a directional flow shunt. She also had a bulb syringe which she also attached. Because Nick's heart beat only once every ten minutes or so, she would have to have to siphon his blood and pump it into Schanke. She also had to hook Schanke up to an empty blood bag. With Nick's blood coming in the excess blood would have to have some place to go.

"How are you feeling?" she asked as she monitored them both.

"Tired and ravenous," he said. "Nat, how fast is my blood flowing into Schanke?"

"Not very, I want to control it as much as possible."

"Nat, you have to open it up. We're never going to get the results we want by being cautious."

She was not willing to do that yet and was gathering herself for a verbal battle, when he took her hand and looked into her eyes. Somehow, the youthfulness of his appearance could not negate the age and wisdom in those ancient eyes.



"Nat, trust me. I'll be okay."

Against her better judgment, she opened the shunt valve wide. Within minutes she had pumped the remainder of his blood into Schanke. Nick closed his eyes, and he did not respond to her voice. Was he dead? Wasn't he already dead? This was too confusing for Nat.

"Oh, my God," Nat said as she leaned over his body.

"Is he all right?" Schanke asked. Nat nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Schanke, how are you?" she rushed to his side of the bed and checked him out quickly.

"Do something, Nat." "I don't like the way he looks. Can't you do something?"

"Just lie back down, Schanke." Nat pulled some pillows up behind him, so he could see what was going on. She immediately put the shunt in a neutral position and returned to Nick's side.

There was no response from Nick and Nat was starting to feel just the tinniest bit of panic.

"How do you resuscitate a vampire?" Schanke asked.

"You know?"

"Yeah, I heard everything. It was the strangest thing. I could hear everything, but I couldn't respond. Nat, you're not going to believe this, but I think his blood is moving back into him."

"Just relax," she said, "and let it happen."

With a speed that amazed them both, they watched the dark blood as it flowed back into his body. Nat immediately lifted the bag with Schanke's blood high so that it could reenter his body. Nick opened his eyes.

"It worked?" He asked.

"It worked," Nat and Schanke said in unison.

With a look of surprised relief on his face, Nick sat up and put his hand on Schanke's shoulder.

"It's good to have you back partner," he said.

"This isn't going to make me want to howl at the moon, is it?" Schanke asked.

"No, that's werewolves," Nat replied in her best sarcastic tone.

"Thanks for taking that bullet for me, Schank, but I have to tell you...."

"He knows," Nat offered as she removed the needles from their arms.

"Sure," Schanke said, "I heard you talking to me. I have heard everything everyone has said since the shooting." He stilled looked bewildered and unbelieving. Everything had happened so fast and he'd been aware of so much, without having any control over anything. It was a great deal to ask of an already befuddled brain.

"I've got to get something to eat," Nick said. With just a trace of unsteadiness, he got up from the bed, but he made it down stairs to the refrigerator.

"Nat, I don't know how I feel about all this," Schanke said with more than a little concern in his voice.

"You know Nick, he's not a typical anything. But, he's a good person. He wanted to help you the only way he could. He gave you back your life, just as you saved his," Nat said.

"But this stuff is more than just weird. I thought vampires were...evil? I'm worried about that."

"I don't think you can characterize Nick as being evil. I know he's done things in the past that were not right, but the person we know and care about is not that person. He hasn't killed in over a century. If anything, he's trying to repay his debt to humanity."

"I'll really have to think about this, but you know it explains a lot of the strange stuff about Nick that I've always felt was weird. Nat, do you think you could find me a robe or something? All I've got on is this hospital gown."

"Sure," she said and started rummaging in the walk in closet.

Nick stood in the doorway of the bedroom. He was sipping what looked like red wine from a glass. Now, Schanke knew what it really was. Nick came over to the bed and sat on the edge next to Schanke.

There was a moment of silence between them, then Schank took the glass from Nick's hand. He rolled the liquid around in the glass, then

sniffed at it like a wine connoisseur tempting his palate. Nick wasn't quite sure what he was up too or what his response would be.

"It has a fruity bouquet and you've let it breathe just long enough for the flavors to blend aromatically. I'd say it was a 1993 Guernsey with heavy touches of clover and alfalfa, with just a hint of soft oats," Schanke said in an exaggeratedly arrogant tone.

Nick looked at Schanke and had to smile.

"You know, Schank, the funny thing is you're absolutely right."

They laughed together and the tension was broken. Familiarity took over. Whatever doubts Schanke had about his partner faded with the knowledge that Nick had been willing to lay his life on the line for him.



It was just after sunset several weeks later. Nick took the elevator to the garage to get his Caddie. He stopped abruptly.

"Schank, I'm going to...." He didn't finish, not knowing what dastardly deed he could do to Schanke, but he'd think of one.

His Caddie, it's top down from the beautiful evening before, was filled with small lead fishing weights. A note hung from the rear view mirror.

"Hope you can get the lead out," it read, "maybe this will slow you down the next time you leave the Caddie and me in the middle of the street." It was signed S.

"Schanke, " was all Nick could say over and over again as he dumped hands full of lead onto his garage floor. His poor Cadillac looked on in stoic silence.



# Midnight's Son

By: Star Urioste

Traces of fear on his face made him appear vulnerable, uncommon in a man at the turn of the twentieth century, nearly impossible in the face of an eight hundred year old vampire. LaCroix watched as Nicholas backed away from him. That quality of vulnerability, of innocence and purity layered with wit and intelligence, had drawn him to Nicholas centuries ago. Now, they faced each other, the handsome and forever youthful Nicholas and his older, more experienced mentor, LaCroix. In addition to Nicholas' more compelling traits, he also had an iron will. His willfulness negated much of the dominance that LaCroix had tried vainly to cast over the younger vampire. For years LaCroix had tried to force Nicholas back to the vampire lifestyle. Now he was using the technology of the present to accomplish what, heretofore, had proved impossible. Chemical technology might yet bring his wayward child back into the fold.

"Who are you?" Nicholas said as he stared directly at LaCroix and backed away further from the advancing man.

"I am your brother, your father." LaCroix spoke softly as he continued to advance.

"How can you be both?" Nicholas said angrily, confusion was visible on his face.

"Trust me. Here, I have something for you. I know you're hungry. You haven't eaten for quite some time."

LaCroix held out a glass filled with red fluid.

"Yes, I'm hungry and thirsty, it smells good...." Nicholas came forward and took the glass from LaCroix's hand. He took a cautious sip, then drained the glass trying to quell his terrible hunger.

"It tastes too sweet," Nicholas said as he closed his eyes, his body going limp. He spiraled toward the floor. LaCroix swiftly caught his companion and lifted him up in his arms. The glass dropped to the floor and shattered. Carrying him into the darkness, LaCroix placed Nicholas gently on a bed in rooms near his own. He had isolated Nicholas from the outside world. Nothing, and no one, would interfere with his plans.

"Yes, I know it's sweet," he whispered. "It is laced with a combination of drugs guaranteed to jumble your brain and make you

dependent upon me. I'll admit, it's a rather underhanded way of dealing with you, Nicholas. But then, I never play fair. It's not my style."

For months he'd been planning his little abduction. He'd consulted with several highly unethical pharmaceutical manufacturers, learning much about the potency and effects of their drugs. Those he had purchased were a thousand times more potent than those sold on the street. Then, he had found the supplier from whom Nicholas purchased his bovine blood. That accomplished, it was a simple matter to have this supply tainted slowly, in ever increasing amounts. The supplier had little defense against LaCroix's 'Blood Tongue'. Now, Nicholas was his again. He held him captive in his tower sanctuary, confused and incapacitated. It was a good feeling to have him near, to hear his all too familiar heartbeat, to look down and see the beauty in his sleeping face.

"I don't know how long I shall have to keep you this way, but we have forever, don't we, Nicholas."

LaCroix took off Nicholas' familiar clothing. He replaced it with simple cotton garments that would give no clues as to time or place. All the more to confuse his already fragile mental state. Soon enough he would be attired in clothes that befitted a man of unbelievable wealth and power. For that is what they were; personages of wealth and power. The mortal world could not imagine the influence vampires had over them. And now, Nicholas was going to live that power, feel all it's intoxicating grandeur and, hopefully, revel in the darkness that it held. Perhaps, keeping him in this drugged state would be the way to bring him over for good.



"Play the tape again," Schanke said. He was were aware of Nick's vampirism. Nick had taken Schank into his confidence during their last case. And now, Nat was grateful that he had. She reached for her answering machine and pressed the play back button.

Sounding anxious and uncertain, Nick's voice filled the space between his two devoted friends.

"Nat, I'm sorry to bother.....Nat, I think I'm losing it. I know I've been feeling strange these last several weeks.....Please, Nat I need you desperately.....I...." They could hear his elevator door open, its distinctive sound unmistakable.

"You! Stay away from me...." Nick said in an angry, and at the same time frightened, voice. There was the sound of a gun firing. The phone hit the floor with a heavy thunk followed by a softer sound as a body fell on the cement. They heard foot steps walking slowly toward the phone.

They stopped and sounded heavier as they retreated back to the elevator. The elevator door opened and closed again. Silence.

They had both listened to the tape over and over again for the past hour or so. Nick had disappeared and the phone message was all they had to go on. Nat reached over to rewind the tape on the recorder one more time.

"I can't believe that someone walked in here, shot Nick and carried him off. You've seen how bullets affect him, it's just not possible," she said.

"Yeah, I know. He pushed me out of the line of fire last month and took that bullet meant for me. I gotta tell you, when he got up and had me drive him home...I couldn't believe he was still alive. No, I don't think some one came in here, shot him and took him away. But, that's what the tape is telling us and we've got to take this step by step to a logical conclusion."

"There's no sign of a struggle, no bullet holes, no casings, no blood. Whoever did this was clever." Natalie was worried and angry at herself. Her feelings for Nick clouded her reason and made it hard for her to think like a professional.

"It's got to be someone he knows. Someone who wants him. Someone who's strong enough to overpower him and take him away." Schank was dogging the facts; he'd find the truth.

"LaCroix!" Nat said, "It's got to be LaCroix!"

"Who's he?" Schank asked.

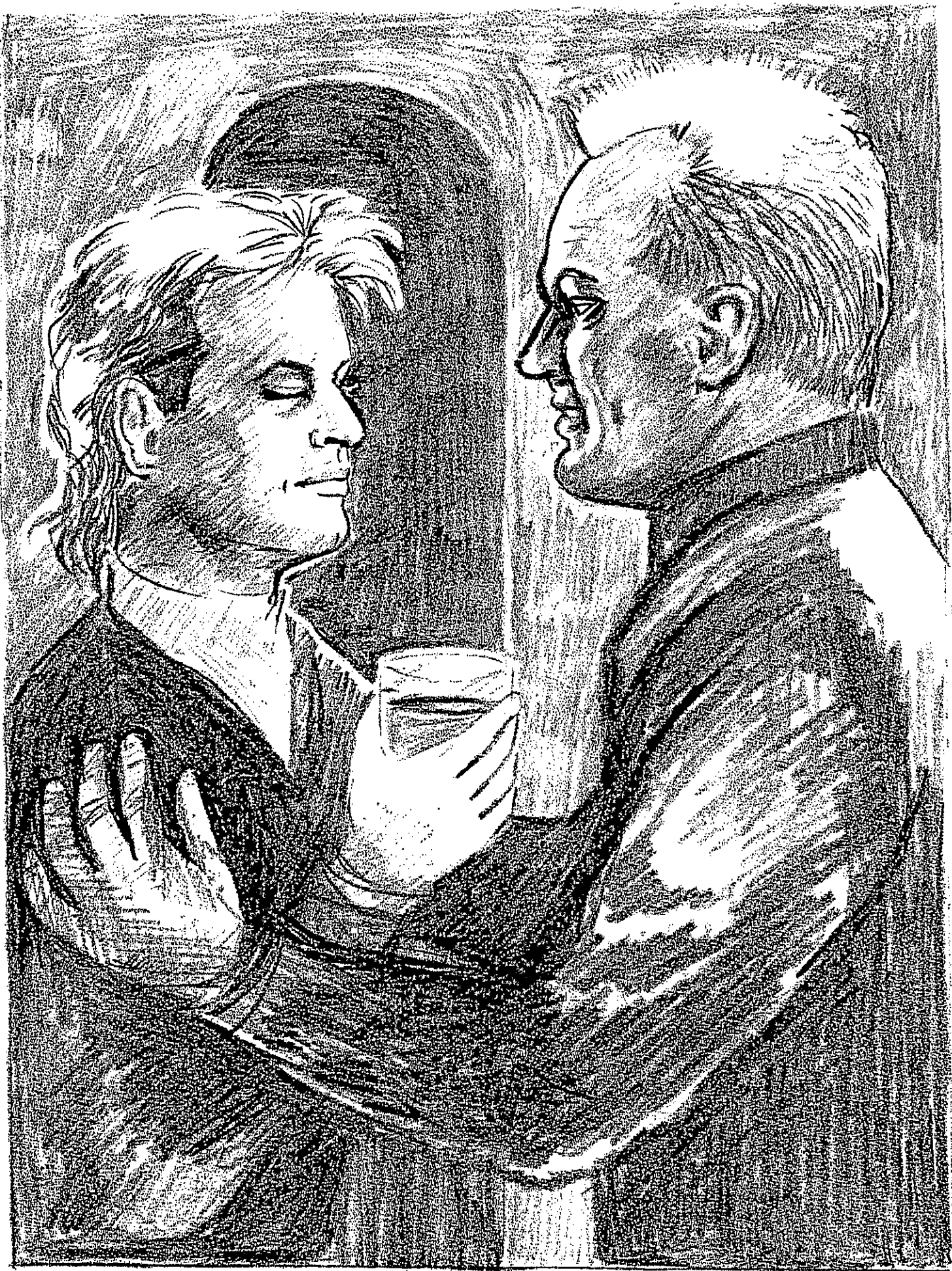
"He's Nick's master, the vampire that brought him over. But, Nick said he thought he killed him after Alyce Hunter was murdered. You know, that first case you worked on together."

"What proof of LaCroix's death did Nick have?" Schank asked.

"None," was her reply.



Nick walked in total darkness. Faces and voices haunted him and taunted his every move. Blood dripped on him from somewhere above; like soil dropping into an open grave. Yes, he was being buried alive. Alive! He could hear hearts beating, thousands and thousands of hearts beating, the hearts of the countless victims he had taken in his endless lifetime. The sound was deafening and he felt he was drowning in the blood. He started screaming for help.



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Nicholas bolted straight up in bed. He was covered with bloody sweat, his eyes wild with induced dementia. LaCroix was at his side. Protectively, LaCroix held him, comforting him in his powerful embrace.

"There, there, Nicholas, it was only a bad dream." LaCroix spoke in the ancient French dialect they both knew so well. Nicholas clung to him.

"Please help me," Nicholas pleaded in the same dialect, "please, I can't go on like this...please." Nicholas started to cry into LaCroix's white shirt. But the tears were not the salty wetness of mortals; they were blood tears. LaCroix knew how far he had pushed Nicholas, how hard it was for a vampire to cry, but he intended to push him even further.

"I am going to make everything better for you, my son," LaCroix held Nicholas tight, then he lifted his chin slightly so that he could make eye contact. He spoke exclusively in the ancient immaculate French.

"I am going to help you. I am going to let you sleep, dreamlessly, without fear, without nightmares. But, you must surrender yourself to me. You must submit your will to me without question, without hesitation. Do you understand?"

Nicholas looked into his eyes and LaCroix could see the struggle there. Some small part of him still battled from deep inside the drug induced psychosis.

"If you do not submit, I can help you no further." LaCroix said and he stood, as if to leave.

"No! No please don't leave me.....not here, not alone. I'll do anything you ask, anything...." Again Nicholas was reduced to tears, as LaCroix sat back down beside him.

"That's much better. Now, look at me. You will sleep. You will sleep without dreaming. Your eyes are already heavy." LaCroix closed Nicholas' eyes and tilted his head at an angle. An angle that gave him easy access to the veins of his neck. Biting into Nicholas, he bled him, as he had done so many centuries ago. The weakness of a vampire with an insatiable hunger that would not be denied, would enhance the drug induced insanity. His hunger would consume him and LaCroix knew who would be the perfect victim for his young friend. LaCroix contemplated the irony of his choice and, with a supremely satisfied look of evil upon his face, he went to find Nicholas' next meal.





Schanke, good old follow-your-instincts Schanke, had been the one to discover the tainted blood. He had been nosing around Nick's flat, careful not to touch anything, when he saw the pieces of glass near the base of one of the windows. The glass had been one of Nick's prized goblets. He'd thrown it so hard, it had turned into tiny shards barely visible from any real distance.

"Looks like someone has been playing with Nick's food." Schanke, said as he lifted a shard of glass with a clean handkerchief and brought it over to Nat for her inspection. The glass was heavily coated with pinkish crystals, which Nat suspected was the precipitate of a chemical substance.

"Bring a couple of bottles from the fridge and let's get to the lab where I can analyze it under a microscope."

Schanke was way ahead of her and they were out the door and to the coroner's lab in record time.



Nick lay peacefully in bed. He was covered with his own blood from LaCroix's bite. Even his blood seemed deranged. Much of it had not been absorbed back into his body as it was supposed to do. LaCroix stood at the foot of the bed.

"Sleep, Nicholas, until I return. I have something special planned for you. You must be patient until then."

Nicholas twitched in his sleep. His brain and body waging a war of wills against LaCroix's suggestion and the drug induced stupor. His hands gripped the bloody sheets beneath him so tightly that they were soon nothing but shreds. But with each exertion he used up a precious part of himself, which would leave him no reserve to fight the evil that held him prisoner.



"God, Schanke, I'm glad you didn't touch this piece of glass with your bare hands. There's enough psycho tropic drugs, and just plain lethal toxins, on this one little piece of glass to kill a human ten times over. The bottles have varying levels of the drugs mixed in them. Nick must be in very bad shape right now."

"We've got to find him. I'll start with the info we have and work back to this guy LaCroix. But, you've got to know, Nat, it doesn't look good for Nick. LaCroix's had him for several days and who knows what

state he's in." Schanke had that worried look on his face, the one he reserved for end-of-the-world situations.

"Do your best, Schanke." Nat encouraged him.

"I'm afraid even your best won't be good enough," a voice spoke from the doorway of the lab. LaCroix stood motionless, his leather jacket glistening with droplets of rain.

Nat had never seen LaCroix, but she knew it was him with absolute certainty.

"What have you done with him, LaCroix?" Her anger carried her forward and only Don's arm pulling her back saved her from LaCroix's grip. But it didn't matter. In an instant, LaCroix stood between them. His arm firmly around Nat's waist.

"Actually, your deductions are right on the mark, Doctor. Being a Doctor who specializes in the dead, I thought you would be just what he needs."

"Schanke!" Nat screamed as LaCroix lifted her off her feet and carried her toward the door.

Don made an attempt to help her, but he was no match for LaCroix. The vampire backhanded him across the room and left him unconscious on the cold tile floor.

Once outside, LaCroix looked straight into Nat's eyes.

"Cooperate now or Nicholas will suffer for your impudence later," he commanded.

She stopped struggling and screaming.

"There, that's much better. I think we're going to get on famously. Just remember, I hold Nicholas' fate in my hands. Cross me and **he** will pay the price for your actions."

LaCroix lifted from the ground and Nat felt that queasy feeling you get when a carnival ride takes you where you've never been before.

"Why are you doing this to him? What's he ever done to you?" She could barely control her anger. She gripped his leather jacket tightly and she didn't dare look down. She wasn't afraid of heights, but this wasn't heights, this was way beyond heights.



Nick swam toward the light. His head ached and his stomach churned. He awoke and immediately vomited copious amounts of blood over the side of the bed. He breathed deeply and held firmly to the bed as his mind reeled once more. He felt fragile. His system had never rejected blood in all of his 800 years. It was a new experience, one he didn't want again. His head cleared a bit. He tried to sit up, thought better of it and merely looked about.

He didn't know where he was. His hunger began to overpower him. He sniffed at the air, hoping for the scent of blood. He listened carefully, longing for the sound of a human heart. Desperately, he wanted to feed. He tried to think of who he was, where he was. "The Man of the Night" came to him. He'd been that man for long lifetimes. Forcing himself to his feet, he staggered toward the dim light that shone through an arched doorway. The smell of blood drew him. Losing his footing, he came down on his knees and crawled toward the smell.

There, a small pool of blood on the floor; eagerly he dragged himself to it and sipped at the fresh blood. It was still warm. Then he became aware of a muffled sound, the heart beat of a human. Looking up, he could see the dark form of someone on the other side of the pillar.

He crawled closer, wanting to see who it was. A woman sat at the base of the pillar. She was cruelly tied to it, the ropes cutting deep into her flesh. Her mouth was covered with a piece of beautiful watered silk. There was a gapping wound in her side, which bled, producing the pool on the floor. Her big, dreamy eyes, widened even more as he approached her. But she wasn't afraid, she was glad to see him. He came close, his hunger wanted him to feed, but part of him rejected that desire.

He took the silk from her mouth.

"Nick, are you okay!" The woman said with relief in her voice. She was more concerned for him than her own safety. He took the piece of silk and held it against her wound. His only thought was to stop the bleeding. He was running on instinct now. It was all he had left.

"Nick, it's me, Natalie."

"Natalie?" he said the name as if it were a foreign word. With his free hand he caressed her cheek, it was warm and soft. He reached around behind her and began to untie the ropes that held her.

"Natalie," again he said her name without recognition, "do you know me? I can't remember who I am..." His voice trailed off and he closed his eyes tight, as he fought the hunger. He slumped down further to the floor, his energy levels growing weaker. The hunger threatened to overwhelm him and take away the last bit of humanity that he clung to.

Freed from her bondage, Natalie pulled Nick into her lap. She checked him thoroughly, looking for any outward signs of injury.

"Nick, your name is Nick Knight," she said holding his cool face in her hot mortal hands. "And I'm Natalie, your friend, Natalie."

"Natalie, I'm so hungry," he said. She felt her heart break at his agony. Injured as she was, she couldn't help him out of this place. Her best bet was to try to leave and bring back help.

"Nick, I'm going to leave, find some help...."

"No! Please don't leave me," he grabbed for her hand and held on in desperation. "Don't leave me here alone. This place is filled with darkness and it keeps trying to engulf me...please don't go, Nat." Recognition dawned in his eyes and he threw his arms about her. "Nat, I remember...I remember you. My life, I can...Schanke, Stonetree and...Sidney."

She smiled at the mention of her cat's name. But she could see that he was close to tears. She'd never seen him like this before. Cursing LaCroix for the damage he'd done to Nick's mind, she regrouped her thoughts.

"Nick, it's good that you remember. I can't imagine what he's put you through. But I'm here now and I'll stay with you, I promise." Her voice was soothing and he relaxed at her words.

"Brava, dear Doctor." LaCroix stood like a shadow of death in the arch of the doorway. "So, Nicholas, you've found yourself again. It's a shame, I was hoping we could play more games before that happened. LaCroix withdrew a gun from his leather jacket and aimed it at the couple.

"LaCroix, don't...," Nick begged.

Awkwardly, he pushed himself into a sitting position and moved to shield Nat from LaCroix. The gun went off and a tranquilizer dart struck Nick directly over the heart. He jumped at the impact of the dart, then slumped to the floor in front of Nat, grasping for her and calling her name.

"No!" Natalie screamed. "You bastard."

"How did you know?" LaCroix retorted, smiling at his own little joke.

"If you don't let him feed soon, he'll die of starvation." Angrily she pulled the spent dart from Nick's body.

"He won't take food from me any more. He seems to have caught on that it's tainted. But, you could persuade him to feed. I know that he will eat from your hand. Won't he?"

"I won't give him any of that poison you've been giving him. I'd rather see him die than to go on being tortured by you," she said with conviction.

"I don't want him dead, even you must know that," LaCroix began. He pulled a bag of blood from his jacket and threw it at her. "I'll return. See to it that he feeds."

"This isn't enough," Nat complained bitterly.

"I want him to live, not escape," LaCroix said. His coat sweeping like wings of darkness about him as he left the room. Carefully, she was not in good shape either, she moved him back into her lap. He was conscious enough to know where he was, but his movements were lethargic.

"Nick, you have to eat." With difficulty she tore into the plastic tubing of the bag. She sniffed at the contents and then tipped a tiny amount on her finger. It appeared to be okay, but she had no real way of confirming that. And, though she had said she would, she couldn't let Nick die. She brought the tubing to his lips. "You have to drink, Nick."

Once he had tasted the blood upon his lips, no urging was necessary, his hunger was so great. In a matter of seconds he had drained the bag.

"How are you feeling?" She said, leaning against the pillar for support. He still looked weak and tired, but his color seemed better.

Nick, looking into those wide, beautiful eyes, felt such deep remorse.

"Nat, I'm sorry that I've...."

She didn't let him finish. Placing her finger to his lips.

"I can't even contemplate a life without you. So, don't give me any B.S. about how you're sorry for getting me in this mess. I wouldn't have it any other way. Got that?"

"Yes," he said. "That's a nasty bite," he could see the wound on her side.

"I hope he hasn't given me rabies," she quipped, smiling at his frown of concern. Nat used the watered silk material to wrap the wound.

"We've got to get out of here," she said looking about her.

In his drugged state Nick could only lay within the comfort of her lap and feel totally useless.

"Nick, can you tell if LaCroix is still in the building?"

Nick listened for the tell tale sound of the vampire's heart. "He's gone, at least from the immediate area." Nick closed his eyes.

"How are you doing?"

"Feel out of it, can't seem to think," he moistened his lips, "I'm still really hungry."

"Nick," she said, turning his head toward her. He opened his eyes and tried to focus on her.

"I've brought something that might help you." She withdrew a little plastic case from the pocket of her jacket. As she opened it a small wooden cross on a long chain slipped out. She took the cross and put it around her neck.

"I wasn't sure I'd need this, but I'm glad I brought it along. This is what I want to show you." Nestled in the case were several syringes. "There's enough stimulant in this one syringe to kill a dozen human beings. It might help you counter the effects of the drugs that he's given you. It might kill you in your weakened state. I can't make the decision to administer it. It's your life, what do you want me to do, Nick?"

He looked up into her dreamy eyes and tried hard to think about his options.

"I'd rather be dead than in this condition. But, if it kills me, you'll be left at his mercy. And believe me, Nat, he has no mercy."

"Don't worry about me, this is about you. You have to make a decision."

"Do it," he said.

She tore a piece of his shirt and tied it tightly around his upper arm. She picked up one of the syringes. He stopped her hand momentarily.

"What ever happens...Nat, I love you." he squeezed her hand and then released her.

She touched his face, gently, caressing the curve of his jaw, then bent her head and kissed him full on the mouth. She didn't have to say the words, he could feel her love in the tenderness of her kiss. She had to wait for five or six minutes, for the vein to come up, the vampire response time was so much slower than that of a human. With practiced skill she injected the fluid directly into Nick's vein. He took a deep breath, he convulsed violently, muscular tremors moving throughout his body. He became suddenly rigid, then completely still. His eyes stared blankly into space. Nat felt for his nearly nonexistent pulse. There was nothing. Patiently, she waited. Removing the cloth tie from his arm, she watched, her heart racing in her body.

"You have to be all right, Nick, you have to be all right..." she chanted. He was so very still. She was growing more anxious with each passing moment, fearing the worse, that she had killed him with her own hand. As she looked at his pale features, she felt hot tears, clouding her vision.

"Nick, don't leave me," she whispered in desperation. Ignoring the pain from the wound on her side, she cradled him in her arms and began to rock back and forth. Hot tears of guilt and loss flowed down her cheeks and her control broke. She sobbed openly, crying into the silkiness of his hair. She felt her heart break. There should have been some response by now. Her tears fell upon his face.

He groaned, exhaling a deep breath. Her eyes opened wide and she released her grip on him a little, so she could examine him.

"Nat, I don't know what's worse, his drugs or yours." His eyes opened and he saw her tear stained face. "It's okay, it's all right," he said as he brought his hand to touch the shiny trail of tears.

"Nick, I thought I'd killed you," she said with relief in her voice.

He sat up with difficulty and took her in his arms, holding her tightly to him. His mind was clearing, he felt a rush of energy and he wondered how long it would last. Burying her face in the blood stained folds of his shirt, she clung to him.

"We have to get out of here fast," he said. "I don't think I'll be good for too long. I need to get us back to my place. Feeding is the only thing that will really help."

He got to his feet and pulled her up with him. The room was barren. The tall windows were painted over with a dull colored paint.

"What time is it, Nat. Is it night?"

"Yes, I think it is."

He walked over to the windows with her hand in his. A few meters away from them he let go of her and with his elbow shattered the huge glass panels. The night sky shown through, the cool night breeze blew in. Natalie drew closer to him. He was looking down through the opening he'd made. They were ten stories up, at least.

"Come to me," he said opening his arms to her. She came forward and he gripped her with some of his old power.

"You're not going to try to fly, are you?" she said, worried about his ability to do anything supernatural at this point.

"No, I don't think I can fly, even by myself, in this condition. But I can control our drop to the ground."

"Nick, are you sure?"

He could tell she didn't believe he could.

"Nat, if we go roaming through the building, LaCroix will most likely find us before we can find our way out. We have to have a little faith."

"Okay," she said, and she took a white-knuckle grip on him. They stood at the edge of the window. He held her tightly, nodded at her, then jumped through the ragged opening. Nat saw the ground rushing up to meet her. She wanted to close her eyes, but couldn't; so she looked at Nick. His eyes were golden and he was concentrating on the ground below for all he was worth. They landed a little harder than he planned. He lost his balance for a second, but caught himself before he could lose it completely. They both heaved a huge sigh of relief. He pulled her after him, running down the street until they came up to the first car in sight. He took out the driver's side window with his fist and opened the door. Sweeping the broken glass from the seat, he got in and leaned under the dash. He was there for a minute, and then the car engine roared to life. Pressing the accelerator once to turn off the automatic choke, he slid to the passenger seat and motioned Nat to get in.

"I didn't know you could do that!" Nat was a little amazed at his hot-wiring ability.

"You'd be surprised what I'm capable of," he said smiling wickedly at her.

"I don't know if I really want to find out," she quipped back. "Do you know where we are? I'm completely lost."



"Go straight for about two miles and the streets will become familiar to you," he said.

"How can you possibly know that?" she asked.

"When you've flown over the city as much as I have you always know where you are," he said as he reclined the seat and rested against it.

"You okay?" Nat ventured.

"I will be once we get home. I think we just squeaked by on that last jump." He was starting to look exhausted again.

Once she knew where she was, Nat drove quickly to his flat.



Resting on his leather couch, draining one of many glasses of blood, Nick was starting to feel like a vampire again.

"I'm glad you keep a 'stash'," Nat said from the kitchen where she was washing up after pulling several bottles out of a secret holding place in the fireplace.

"The blood mixed with wine stays fresh a long time, and I think there's enough nourishment here to get me by for a while," he said.

"Well, I'm going to get you some untainted blood from the hematology center," she said as she examined the bandages she'd used to cover her bite.

"Whatever you do, be careful. He's out there and he's going to be angrier than hell at both of us."

Nat looked at Nick, a trace of despair showing in her features. "What do we do Nick? There's no place to hide."

"We're out in the open, all right. Even if we run, he'll find us. He has all of eternity to search."

She came and sat on the couch next to him, smothering him in her embrace.

"I don't want to lose you. You mean too much to me."

"I know," he said, his smile turning into a kiss. "I feel the same way about you."

It felt good that they could, at last, speak their true feelings. She felt tears of joy flashing hot into her eyes, and just a little self-consciously she brushed them away.

"Well, I've got to get going, if I'm to get everything and be back here before LaCroix discovers we've escaped."

"I'll be all right. I'm already feeling much better," he reassured her.

She kissed him once more on the lips. And, taking up his car keys, she made her way to the elevator door and was gone. The silence hung heavily in the air around Nick. He looked at the half full glass of blood in his hand and he thought how easily he'd been taken by LaCroix. He'd have to be more careful. The next time, perhaps, things wouldn't work out as well.

Nick heard an infinitesimal sound from the level above him and turned to see LaCroix.

"Come to abduct me again, LaCroix?" he said angrily. "I know your game now, I won't succumb to it again." Nick said looking into the mesmerizing sky blue eyes of his master.

"Nicholas, you wound me with your sharp tongue. I've only come to see you. We didn't get to finish did we, but there will always be time for more, later. We are not bound by the limits of time, are we."

"You never behave as you should, Nicholas. You're always just a little out of cynic with everything. It unbalances my plans and can be quite upsetting," LaCroix smiled down on his youthful companion. "I never grow weary of your complexities."

"Complexities! Is that all I am to you, LaCroix? A trifle, a pet to keep you amused as you try again and again to draw me back into your web?"

"Now, Nicholas, you mustn't upset yourself. You've had a difficult time over the last several days." LaCroix could be so soothing and irritating at the same time.

Nick made as if to stand. He didn't know what LaCroix had in mind, but he knew he had to meet it head on. Before he could blink, LaCroix was at his side, pressing him back down into the comfort of the couch and sitting down next to him. The self-satisfied look in his eyes was chilling. His closeness only strengthened Nick's resolve to withstand any onslaught.

"You had best rest for now. I know what you think of me. But you're wrong. I am no more evil than the bacterium that hunts and kills without discretion, no more evil than the wolf who pulls down the

dreamy-eyed doe. I hunger and I feed; that is **my** way. The way of the predator and prey, the strong and the weak. I have a small niche in this world, Nicholas, but I fill it to capacity. You've come away from this skirmish relatively unscathed, but don't think that I've lost. In point of fact, I think I've learned quite a bit. You love her and she, it seems, feels the same about you."

"Leave her out of this LaCroix!" Upset, Nick grabbed LaCroix's shirt front, but LaCroix merely broke his hold and stood.

"The predator is part of nature, Nicholas. And, if you won't be a predator, then you relegate yourself to the part of prey. And she, of course, will always be the dreamy-eyed doe won't she, Nicholas?"

LaCroix's sanctimonious smile disturbed Nicholas to the core.

LaCroix turned and flew to the second level.

"What are you up to, LaCroix?" Nick demanded.

"Why, I'm midnight's son, Nicholas. You know, you've been there. I hunger, so I must feed. We will play the game again, when I chose to do so. When you least expect it." With that the master vampire turned into an impenetrable fog and the fog dispersed into the room.

Nick was alone, he felt sick inside, knowing the battle of wills was far from over. Where and when LaCroix would show up again was going to be a real problem, for not only him, but everyone in his life. He tried not to think of the darkness of which LaCroix was capable. He knew that jeopardy hung over his head, like sword of Damocles. Now, LaCroix could go after Natalie as well. How could he protect himself and Natalie? He had to think of a way. Running wasn't the answer. That would only leave Nat totally vulnerable. What could he do? He put his feet up on the couch and settled into it's familiar comfort.

"So, you've won again, even by losing," Nick spoke contemptuously to the empty room. Closing his eyes, he tried to push away all his feelings of self loathing. "You made your bed long ago, Knight," he said to himself. It's just too bad there's no one willing to sleep in it with you." The darkness in him bristled and he lifted the glass of blood once more to his lips. "To my continued good health," he said with more than a trace of sarcasm. "And to you, Midnight's Son, for making me so painfully aware of what I really am."



# FIRST NIGHT, LAST NIGHT

By: Sharon Wells

Nicholas felt the heat of pleasure from his love play with Jeanette turn to ice in his veins as he looked at the stranger. The man stood beside Jeanette, his mirthless, cool blue eyes holding Nicholas captive as he slowly approached the rumpled bed.

Nicholas' first urge was to flee, but his body would not obey him. He rose up on his knees, his mind frantically trying to make sense of all this. What did this man want with him?

"You are afraid." The man's voice was as cool as his gaze. "It serves you well, good knight, for I am your worst nightmare come to life." He smiled, his lips looking almost ruddy against his marble-white skin.

Yet still, Nicholas could not move. His hands clenched ineffectively at his linen shirt. "What do you want?" Was that his own voice, so hoarse and distant in his ears?

"I want what you have to offer, Nicholas. I want your fear, your strength, your very life."

The man stood close to the bed, now, and Nicholas was vaguely aware of the sound of Jeanette leaving and shutting the door behind herself. He was alone with this fiend and, he suddenly realized, helpless.

A fury at his own sense of powerlessness rose up within him, burned in his gut, and enabled his frozen limbs to move. Nicholas edged backwards toward the wall. "Leave me."

The pale blonde demon laughed. "Never." He cast off his black cloak and pulled at the ties at his neck. "I am LaCroix. Is that not rich?"

The name spun in Nicholas' mind. LaCroix. The Cross. "Is this some jest?" He could see his weapons and armor across the room, hopelessly out of reach.

"My very existence is a jest." LaCroix moved again, this time his movements so quick, Nicholas' eyes could not follow them. LaCroix moved on to the bed with both knees, but did not advance;

neither did Nicholas retreat. He had nowhere to go. His back was against the cool plaster of the wall.

It entered Nicholas' head that LaCroix might have mistaken him for someone else, someone who liked the company of other men. "I do not lay with men," Nicholas told him.

"Neither do I." LaCroix smiled, but the smile did not touch the cold depths of his eyes.

"Then...what do you want?" Nicholas felt a primordial dread clutch at him. This devil wanted his life and would settle for nothing less. "Why?" Nicholas whispered.

LaCroix's blue gaze raked him. "You have forsaken your god, your beliefs and hopes. You are now ready for what I have to offer." As if reading Nicholas' mind, he continued. "No...not death. I bring you a gift richer than mere life or death. I bring you power beyond your pitifully lacking imagination."

He continued relentlessly closer to Nicholas, who now knelt without moving, his mind numb with the realization that he could not escape.

"Even as I speak, you find yourself unable to move," LaCroix's voice grew soft, almost gentle. "You see, it is a power I have, to transfix mere mortals like you. There are many other gifts I will impart, slowly, as you prove yourself worthy as my pupil."

Nicholas wanted to shout that he did not want to learn such unholy things. He regretted his lack of faith and urgently sought within himself to regain it. But such was not an easy occupation, especially with LaCroix now close enough to touch the bare skin at the crook of his neck.

"You need me, Nicholas. I am the master, and you shall be my apprentice. We all need a son to pass our knowledge on to. You shall be like a son to me." Even as he spoke, LaCroix's cool fingers caressed Nicholas' neck. It was not the caress of a father.

Nicholas shuddered with terror and disgust. Through gritted teeth he forced out a "No." It did not deter LaCroix, whose free hand gripped Nicholas' right shoulder.

"Look into my eyes, Nicholas. What do you see?" Nicholas had no choice but to obey. He found himself looking into the icy depths of the demon's eyes and there he saw how much LaCroix relished fear and terror and even disgust. When he would look away, Nicholas found he could not. He felt himself drawn down into a dark abyss. The cold hands on his flesh tightened.

A series of images flashed before Nicholas' mind, visions of death and destruction, of pain and horrors too repulsive for Nicholas to bear, yet he did. Within his heart, Nicholas knew he saw Hell in LaCroix's eyes. He wanted to reject it, to push it away, but found he could not.

Then the visions vanished. Nicholas found himself looking into the pale face of the demon who wanted his soul. His body trembled from the horror of his realization.

"You have seen the horrors and pain. Now I will show you the pleasures." LaCroix's head bent. Nicholas flinched as the demon's lips gently brushed against the sensitive flesh of his neck. He felt LaCroix's tongue flick against the skin. He closed his eyes, fighting the rising bile in his throat.

Suddenly everything changed. LaCroix had not moved, but instead of repulsion, Nicholas found himself being drawn toward what was about to happen, though he still did not fully understand what it was. A yearning grew within him, a hunger. Momentarily he was aware that they were not his own urges he experienced, but LaCroix's. Somehow, the fiend was projecting his hungers, his anticipation to Nicholas.

Even realizing that the demon was controlling him, causing him to accept his touch, Nicholas' body relaxed. His eyes closed as LaCroix's mouth closed over his neck. He was aware momentarily of his heart beating, of the breath rushing in and out of his lungs, of the feel of the other's hands holding him still. Then there was a moment's pain as LaCroix's teeth ripped into his skin, penetrating his flesh and vein.

The pain filled him, flooding his senses until all that existed in the world was the burning agony in his neck. It throbbed through him with each frantic beat of his heart, surging into his chest, down his arms, and up into his jaw.

His mouth opened in silent protest.

In a single instant the pain dissolved into blinding ecstasy. The unspoken cry died upon Nicholas' lips. His eyes opened wide in astonishment as pleasure struck him as powerfully as lightning. A soft moan of pleasure escaped him, as Nicholas' hands rose to clasp LaCroix to himself, to hold that which brought more pleasure than food, wine, or women.

He was aware of the urgent sucking sounds as LaCroix drank in his life's essence, of the hard feeling of the other man's body beneath his hands, and of the incredible floating, bursting bliss that pounded through him. It did not matter that he grew weak, that his hands

dropped because he could no longer hold up his leaded limbs, that only LaCroix held him up against the wall now that he had lost his strength. The only thing that existed in his world was the impossible rapture that played through his body and mind to his very soul.

The pleasure stopped. Nicholas could feel LaCroix's breath as he spoke against his ear. "Now you must drink, my fledgling. Drink and find even more joy."

Nicholas could not open his eyes. He felt LaCroix lower him to the bed, then something was thrust against his parted lips. Warm liquid ran into his mouth. He tasted blood. At first he wanted to turn his head away and thrust the offending taste away. Then, as he actually swallowed LaCroix's blood, came the pleasure again, this time so strong it took control of him.

Like a man dying of thirst, like an infant at its mother's breast, Nicholas drank. Once again, the rapture cascaded through him, overwhelming his senses, filling his weakened body with strength. He wanted to laugh and shout his joy, but it would mean he had to stop drinking, and nothing would cause Nicholas to stop. Now he had found the secret of life and death. He gladly drowned in the throbbing ecstasy. It raced through him, like lava rising in a volcano, until it burst through him, causing him to shudder in unbridled exhalation.

"Enough." LaCroix's voice filled his mind. The feeding stopped, and Nicholas' hands rose to bring the source of his pleasure back. "Enough. Now you shall feed me unto your mortal death, Nicholas, my son. When you wake again, you shall be one of us, truly my son."

The words floated through Nicholas' consciousness, but he could not understand their meaning. He was aware of LaCroix's shifting weight, then once again his mouth upon Nicholas' neck.

Like a warm tide, the rapture inundated him. The stars soared past him until he was alone in the dark heavens. The rapid faint beating of his heart filled the universe as wave after wave of pleasure erupted, shattering him, sending him further into the eternal darkness until there was nothing.





# *Schanke's Knight Out*

By: Star Urioste

Don was a lucky man to have made a catch like Myra. Her strawberry blonde hair was a mass of ringlets that she pulled back from around her face, but she let the length hang provocatively to her shoulders. Her voluptuous figure evoked sensuality and feminine charm as she sat across from Nick Knight. Myra Schanke was attractive, even to an eight hundred year old vampire. She looked at her husband's partner. His youthful good looks and boyish smile were very comforting to her. Those sky blue eyes of his seemed the gentlest she ever seen and she spoke frankly to this trusted friend of the family.

"You know, Nick, I sleep better at night knowing that he's out there with you. I know you'll take care of him. That makes a world of difference to me."

"Thanks, Myra," Nick said. "He sort of gets under your skin, and before you know it, you can't get him out. He practically adopts you, and you're family." Nick didn't tell her that for centuries he'd never known what a family felt like. Until he met Schanke. Now Myra, Don and Jenny were a part of Nick's extended family. It was wonderful to be loved and accepted by real, mortal people.

Jenny was sitting patiently in Nick's lap. She knew Uncle Nick would give her his full attention as soon as he and Mommy were finished with their grown-up stuff.

"Well, I think this is going to be a wonderful birthday party, Nick. Thanks for helping me with the details."

"Everyone is looking forward to surprising him. I'll keep him occupied until things are complete at the station. Will you have enough time to round up the other people and get everything to the ready room in time?"

"Yes, most of it has been arranged, so that there'll be the minimum amount of activity at the station. We don't want him getting suspicious."

"Then, I guess I'd better get back to him before he gets on my case," Nick said, as he turned his attention to Jenny. He lifted her high in the air as he stood and she thrust her arms out as if she were in flight. He brought her back down to his chest and she smothered him in one of her little bear hugs. She wasn't going to let him get away without one.

"You'll come back soon, so we can play?" Jenny asked.

"Absolutely. I promise." Nick said, and he returned her hug, giving her a kiss good-bye.

Myra stood, too, and gave Nick a hug and a kiss on the cheek before he left.

Once outside, the vampire, who had logged in plenty of flying time, again took to the air. But, this time he took a warm glow with him all the way back to the station.



Nick walked into the ready room in time for the shift call out.

"Where have you been?" Schanke admonished him. "I looked all over for you. There's bad news. The PM shift bombed out on the Red Light killer."

"I know about it, Schanke. Quiet now, Stonetree's going to give the news to the crew."

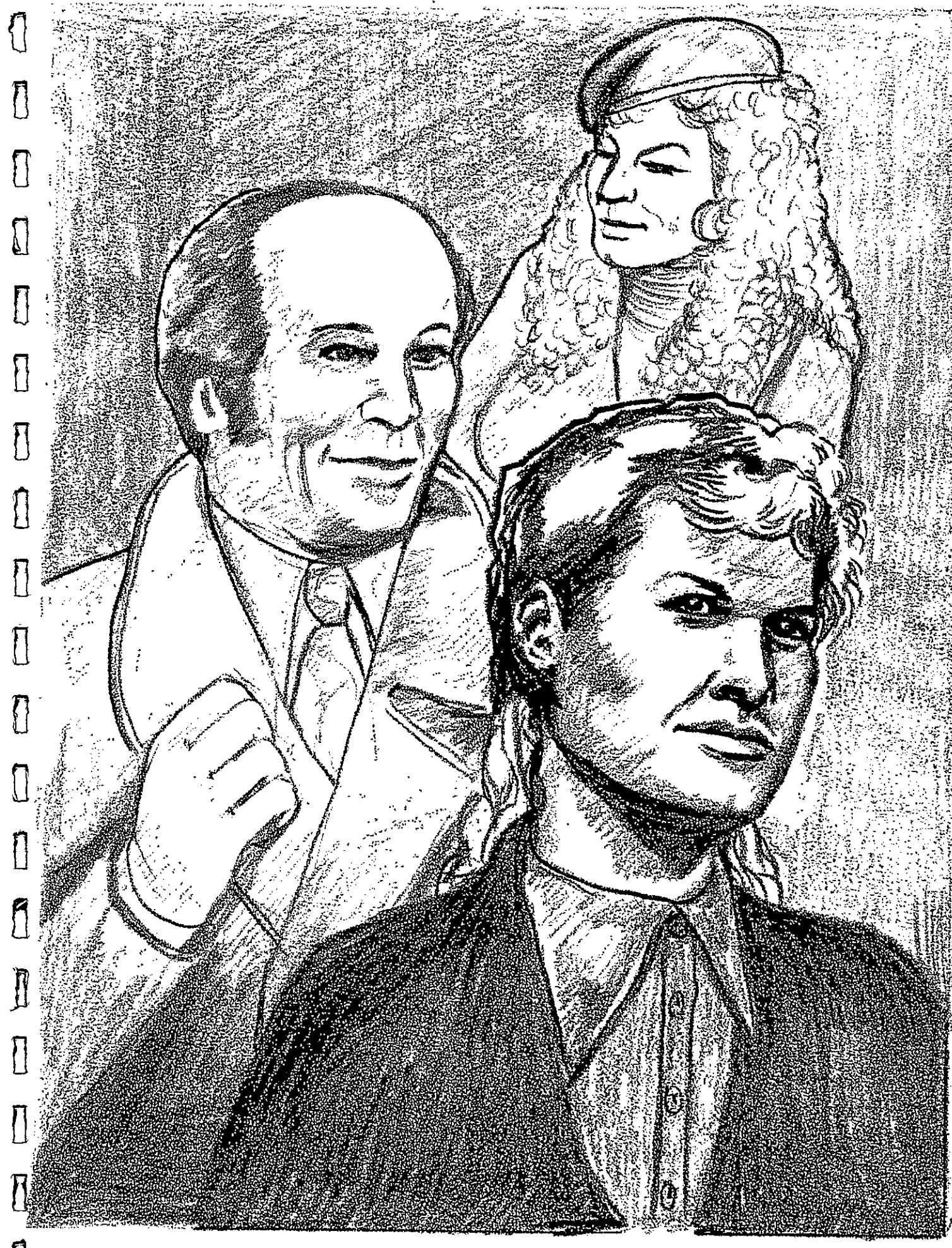
"Officer Yolanda Lopez was found murdered early this evening. As you all know she was undercover to try to nab the Red Light killer. She was working the PM watch, when she disappeared, wire and all. Yolanda's husband and daughters have been notified. It's going to be rough on them for a while. Anybody who wants to speak to Sam can get his home phone number from me. We're also starting a collection to be given directly to the family. If you'd like to donate, see Schanke. He's in charge of setting up the bank account. So, now we're looking at five ladies of the evening and one good cop who have been murdered by this parasite. I want a male volunteer to work in drag to help us catch this bastard. Have I got any takers?"

The room was quiet for a moment, then Nick stood. He was met with silent approval by his brother officers. Only Schanke seemed tickled by the whole idea and turned away from the proceedings to cover his stifled laughter.

"OK, Nick, it's your baby. Now I want all the team leaders to meet in my office after call out. We want to get this perp off the streets, before he does any more damage." Stonetree then relinquished the call out to the watch sergeant. It went on for another fifteen minutes and then broke up.

"I can't believe you'd take this duty," Schanke gave Nick a poke in the ribs to emphasize his point.

"Someone's got to do it, Schank. We can't leave this human garbage running around killing indiscriminately. I'll do whatever I have to do to get him off the streets and behind bars."



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"But still, you in drag, I have a hard time imagining that."

"Well get used to it, Schank. We've got work to do, so let's get to it."



An hour later Schanke was waiting impatiently for Nick to show up. He'd gone to the police effects storage to pick up what he'd need to make a believable lady of the evening. Schanke paced back and forth. Not really good at waiting, he wanted to get in gear and get out on the streets. He was still pacing when a young lovely caught his eye. She was sitting on one of the benches. With the experience of a seasoned pro, she balanced a mirror on her knee to catch the light and freshen her make-up. Her long, strawberry blonde hair came down and covered her unbelievably ample breasts. She was dressed in a dark green leather pants outfit that clung tenuously to her rare form. She reminded Schank of Myra in her early days. She'd been as striking and beautiful as this sweet young thing was today. Whoever she was, she was a babe and Don could feel his hormones kicking him in the ass, and other parts of his anatomy for that matter.

"Excuse me Miss," he said as he came up to her and sat down. "Can I help you?"

"Why yes," she said, "I'm waiting for an Officer Knight. I'm supposed to help him with make-up and accessorizing an outfit."

She spoke with just a hint of an accent. French, Schank thought. It made her even more exotic. Leave it to Knight to find a wow-babe to help him with his assignment. Schanke was green with envy.

"Well, I'm Officer Schanke, Knight's partner. I'm not really sure where he is right now. I've been looking for him myself. Maybe we should wait together. Are you a professional model, Miss...?"

"Regina, Regina Blood, it's so nice to meet you Officer Schanke." She said as she offered him her gloved hand. Then in a deeper, more familiar, voice. "Schank, I'm shocked, what would Myra say if I told her?"

"Knight?" Schanke almost had a heart attack. He put his hand up to Nick's chin and moved his face from side to side just staring at his partner in disbelief.

"Stop that," Nick crooned in his velvety female voice. "or I'll have you up on sexual harassment charges."

Don swallowed hard and tried to act composed.

"Knight, is that really you?"

Nick opened his purse, pulled out his badge and flashed it at Schanke. "Do I have to show you my piece too?"

"No, no it's you."

"Well, now that we've settled that, can we get on with solving this case?"

"Sure, anything you say Nick. Say Nick, how did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"How did you make yourself look so good?"

"I took a great deal of drama in my misspent youth. Quite a few times I had to play women. I just remember how to do the make-up, that's all." He didn't say that during long periods of European history, all female roles were played by youthful, good looking young men like himself. "Now can we get on with this? The night's not getting any younger."

A thoroughly dazed and confused Don Schanke followed his "too gorgeous for words", best friend and partner out into the night. They went to the morgue first. When they arrived, Nat was wrapping up another client.

"What can you tell us about Yolanda's murder?" Nick said.

Natalie turned expecting to see Nick standing behind her, only to find Don Schanke with a very attractive woman next to him.

"Schanke, didn't I just hear Nick?"

"Yes, you did," Nick replied from the woman's lips.

Nat removed her right rubber glove and touched Nick's face. A familiar coolness greeted her.

"It's me Nat," Nick said again and, a little exasperated, he pulled the wig from his head and ruined the illusion.

"Well?" Nick said looking from Schanke to Nat. "Can you both get a grip here? We've got a murderer to catch."

Both of them turned away from him. Schanke put his hands in his pockets and pretended to be concentrating on floor tiles. Nat cleared her throat and picked up a clip board that she had left on the desk. She turned back towards Nick and gave him a summary of the damage done to Yolanda Lopez.

"As with all the other victims, her jaw was shattered, the point of impact right at the apex of the jaw. Our perp is unbelievably strong. The body was tortured and mutilated, with blood loss being the cause of death. All six bodies had to be identified by dental charts. The mutilation and disfigurement of the face, as well as the rest of the body, was that extreme.

"So, there's no question, it was the same guy in all the cases?"

"No question." Nat said. "This one's really sick."

"It's amazing what a tight leather outfit, a wig and a little make-up will do. I'm glad I wasn't the only one fooled by it." Schanke whispered to Natalie.

"Will you give it a rest, Schank," Nick said. He threw the keys to the Caddie at him. "Go fire up the Caddie."

"Sure, Nick. See you Nat," he said as he went out.

"Nick, be careful out there. This may be more dangerous than you think."

"Nat, he won't be able to hurt me. Don't worry, I'll be fine." Nick drew his wig back on and glancing at his faint reflection in a mounted wall mirror, positioned it correctly.

"Nick, when you get back will you do something for me?"

"What?"

"Can you show me how you put your make-up on? I'd like to learn from an old master."

He made as if to throw something at her and she ducked appropriately.

"Just play it safe out there, little lady," Nat retorted as Nick left to join Schanke.

"That was so weird." Nat said to no one. "He looked better than I do."

She turned back to the work at hand and tried not to worry about Nick. He was right, he could take care of himself.



"You got your safety off?"

"Yes."

"You need any more tape on your wire?"

"It's fine, Schank. Now will you quit pestering me like some demented mother hen. I'm ready. As soon as Red Light makes his move, we'll nab him."

"I don't know, Nick, I got a bad feeling in my gut about this one."

"It's probably those three chili cheese dogs you ate," Nick said sarcastically. "I'm a big boy. I know what he's going to do and I'm ready for him."

Schanke just looked more worried.

"Stop, let me off here. I want to talk to Mabel."

"We've got cars scattered around a ten block radius, Nick. Remember to just keep talking. I want to hear you every minute while you're out there."

"You got it," Nick said, as he let himself out of the Caddie and walked a short distance up to a veteran lady of the evening.

"How's tricks tonight, Mabel?"

"Do I know you pretty baby?" Mabel asked.

"It's Nick, Nick Knight."

"Whoa, Nicky, you look better in drag than half the meat that walks these streets. And I'm not tricking tonight, no baby, not with old Red Light out here. I'm just headed to the liquor store to buy me a bottle of old Jack Daniels. He's keeping this woman warm tonight, 'cause no body else is going to," she cackled at her own joke.

"Mabel, where's a good spot to hang. Somewhere I'd be likely to pick up Red Light?"

"Nicky, you're not out here looking for trouble are you?"

"It's my job, Mabel. Can you help me?"

She looked sympathetically at him.

"Walk down three blocks, turn left at Second. It's dark down there, all the really sick fucks like to cruise that corner. Be careful, Nicky, I've seen with my own eyes what ol' Red Light can do. He's not human."

"Neither am I." he said so softly that the wire couldn't pick it up. He thanked Mabel for her help and faded into the fog shrouded night.

"I can't hear anything," Schanke said annoyingly into Nick's left ear.

"It's dark, it's cold and the fog is getting so thick I can't see more than a few feet in front of me. I'm almost there."

The area Mabel had indicated looked as diseased and ruined as it's customers. With little light to see by, Nick depended totally on his superior vampire senses.

"There's an older model, black van. Looks like a '82 Ford." Nick said "It keeps passing just close enough for me to make out."

"License?" Schanke asked.

"Covered or obliterated, Schank, it's not going to be that easy. It's coming closer, Schank...listen carefully."

The van pulled up right next to Nick. Its side door slid open wide. At first it seemed that the opening was an impenetrable darkness. But, on closer examination, Nick found it was hung with a heavy curtain that obscured the interior of the van. He concentrated and felt the excited beat of a man's heart just inside the curtain.

"Hello, handsome," He used his sweetest female tone."Looking for a good time?"

Everything, after that happened awfully fast. Nick felt himself yanked through the van door. He let his beast out and growled. Red Light was incredibly strong, stronger than most mortals, and he pinned Nick momentarily to the floor with his knee. An object in Red Light's hand came toward him. He grabbed for it, knowing he could easily deflect it and overpower Red Light at any time. All the while Schank was yelling in his ear.

"Nick, what's happening, Nick?"

Nick grabbed hold of the object and felt an incredible burning sensation. Stunned, he let go of it. Red Light took advantage of the moment and struck Nick on the chin. Nick felt incredible pain and growled into Red Light's face calling forth all his strength. But Red Light only struck him repeatedly. Nick felt his jaw shatter and lost consciousness. The heavy door of the van slammed shut and the van sped away.



"OK," Schanke yelled into his radio. "Move in." Cars from all over the area sped to Red Light's last reported location.

"Nick, talk to me, talk to me," Schank kept yelling into the two way radio. Silence. Nothing was found at the scene of Nick's abduction.

"Schanke," the voice of Officer Thompson came across the radio.

"Yeah, Thompson, what have you got?"

"We're not getting anything from Knight because we just found the wire hanging from one of the street lights six blocks from here. And Schanke, there's blood on it."

"Damn. Where'd that bastard take you Nick?" Schanke felt that queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach again.



"It's Nick's blood," Nat said.

"No question?" Schanke asked.

"No question, he's got a rare type, it's easy to recognize."

"Damn it, Nat. We were all over the place, within seconds. What went wrong?"

Nat couldn't believe it either. Who could have overpowered Nick?



Nick came to in sour mood. His jaw was healed, but he had a terrible headache. Despite the pain, he surveyed his surroundings. He appeared to be in a basement that had been converted into a modern day torture chamber. Even in the dim lighting, he could make out the numerous vicious looking implements that hung from the walls. He had never seen such a huge collection of knives, saws and other items whose sole purpose was the infliction of pain. A five foot wooden pillar was centrally located in the chamber. Nick was tied securely to it. He could see coils of silver coated stereo wire around his waist and assumed that the same wire held his feet at the base of the pillar and his hands behind him. Silver was the one elemental metal that he had no power against. He was held fast.

Closing his eyes, he felt a moment of deja vu.



Remembering a time from his past. He'd been dressed as a woman then, too. Coming off stage, after performing in a Shakespearean play, he'd found LaCroix waiting for him.

"You were magnificent, Nicholas, you are as believable a vixen as ever I have laid eyes upon."

"What are you up to LaCroix?" Nicholas asked. He had no trust in LaCroix, none whatsoever.

"I have been wanting to try something with you, Nicholas." He stood very close.

Nicholas turned his back on his mentor and started to remove his make-up by the candlelight in his small backstage dressing room.

"I want nothing from you, LaCroix. I am not some youth, a catamite to service your sexual depravations."

"Sex, is that what you think this is about? You simply must remember we are **not** mortals, Nicholas. What I propose is far superior to sex." With that LaCroix threw his arms about Nicholas and held him in a vise-like grip.

Nicholas struggled, but his Master prevailed. His valiant attempts to free himself were futile.

"You are weak, Nicholas, you've been fasting again. No matter, this will break your fast forever." He proceeded to bite deeply into Nicholas's neck, exsanguinating the younger vampire before he could utter a word. Within seconds Nicholas felt a paralysis over come him and he went limp in LaCroix's deadly grip. Still conscious, he knew if LaCroix did not stop, that he would die in the arms of his evil mentor.

LaCroix reveled in the bittersweet taste of Nicholas's blood. He bit and tore at his soft flesh, sucking the last drop of undead life from his young companion. His power filled the small room. He lay Nicholas' inert form on the table with a tenderness that was so out of character for him.

"Now, you must also share the dark feast." He took up Nicholas' stage dagger. Using the dull blade, he opened the carotid artery in his own neck. Nicholas, could neither resist nor protest in his state of near oblivion.

"Drink, Nicholas, the black feast will seal your fate, forever."

LaCroix pressed Nicholas' sharp vampire teeth into his throat. Nicholas fed upon his Master. He felt the flood of ebony blood flow past his

throat. Energy and strength flooded back into his body with each drop of LaCroix's blood. He bit deeper and sucked the fluid faster. He threw his revitalized arms around LaCroix and clung to him as a babe to its mother. But, no matter how much he drank, LaCroix did not weaken as he had. The Master had a darker vitality, a strength that would not yield to his young disciple.

This was a dominance driven, blood ritual. One of the oldest known to vampires. The blood itself conveyed the power of the Master, filling the convert with his formidable will.

"We are one," LaCroix spoke in the 'Blood Tongue'. "We are ever one," his mesmerizing voice compelled Nicholas to follow him.

Now he understood LaCroix as he never had before. LaCroix touched Nicholas' face tenderly and ran his fingers through the trails of blood on his chin.

"We travel the same path, my dear Nicholas." Together they flew out into the gathering darkness of night, with one thought, one desire, one blood.



"You've got to come back." The voice of Red Light brought Nick abruptly back to the present.

Nick growled at the approach of his captor. Baring fangs, his golden eyes alive in the dim light. He strained with all his might against his silver bindings.

"You're very strong. The voices said you were strong, better than the rest." Red Light came towards Nick, a sharp scalpel in his hand. "You fooled us. We thought you were a bitch, but you just look like one. That's OK, because you won't go away, will you?" Red Light brought the scalpel to Nick's neck.

Nick looked into the eyes of Red Light and saw his own image reflected back in icy clarity. Red Light had been careful to preserve Nick's female appearance. Nick could feel the excited heart beat of the serial killer. This wasn't going to be as simple as he thought, nor as painless.

"I slit your throat in the van. I was going kill you and dump your body so that the other cops could find you, but you didn't go away."

Red Light thrust the blade into Nick's carotid artery. There was a spray of blood as Nick's body responded normally. Then, its inhuman regeneration abilities engaged and the wound sealed up and became

undetectable. Nick felt his energy reserves diminish as his body regenerated and he felt the twinge of hunger that accompanied it.

"I know what you are, they sent you to me. You're going to become my favorite and you won't go away, not ever."

"How did you figure out about the silver?" Nick's curiosity was aroused and he had to know.

"The voices told me. It was just lucky that I used my brush on you. I use it on all my bitches." Red Light pulled a mangled antique hair brush out of his back pocket. The hardwood brush was covered over with a solid silver skin and was bristled with boars hair. It was now bent and twisted since using it on Nick.

"What's your name?" Nick ventured.

"Everyone calls me Red Light," the serial killer returned rather sarcastically.

Nick used the 'Blood Tongue'.

"Red Light, you are going to set me free. We are going back to the Police station where I can get you some help."

The killer put his hands to his ears and glared at Nick.

"It's OK," he said to someone other than Nick. "It's OK, I won't listen to him." He came forward with the hair brush in hand. Placing the silver side of the brush against Nick's cheek he watched the skin start to shrivel and burn. Nick howled in agony until the silver was removed from his burning flesh.

"You're not going to do that any more," Red Light said, his face just millimeters from Nick's. The brush was a hair's breadth away from Nick's eyes. "You're only going to say what I tell you, do you understand?"

"Yes," Nick said. He took a deep breath and prepared himself for a long and tortuous night with a mad man who'd just stepped from the gates of Hell. Nick found himself helpless and hopeless before a mortal who could not comprehend his true nature. This mad man was totally in control of the situation. He'd never felt these feelings before. "Yes, I understand." Inside he prayed that Schanke had a lead on him. But he could feel that the wire was gone and, as he looked into the eyes of Red Light, he could swear he felt despair flooding his heart.



Nat and Don were seated at a table in the Raven, a dark hang out for 'Denizens of the Night'. The place was packed and business brisk. Janette appeared from nowhere and sat down to talk to them.

"You wanted to speak to me?" She asked.

"Janette," Nat began. "Nick's disappeared. He was on a stake out..." Janette blanched at the mere mention of the word stake. But Nat didn't miss a beat and continued. "We're pretty sure that the Red Light Murderer has him."

Janette flashed a second of concern at the mention of Nick's peril, but she quickly recovered and was once again the Ice Queen; revealing nothing of her true feelings to the mortals in Nick's life.

Janette leaned towards Schanke "Why don't you get us some drinks? On the house, of course."

Don didn't budge. "Look, we're not playing games here, JA-NETTE." He was on his way to being upset, when she leaned into him and in the 'Blood Tongue' said simply, "Sleep."

Schanke closed his eyes and was out of the loop.

"It's not like Nick to play games." Janette looked hard at Natalie.

"He may have been a little over confident about his being able to handle this guy. I'm afraid he may be in danger or injured."

"That's hard for me to believe," Janette was cold and it put Natalie off.

"Don't you care about him? He's not a part of your clique any more, but he's still important, at least to me."

"I can see that," Janette countered. "And yes, I do care about him. I have **always** cared about him."

"Then help us, we don't know where he is and we're terribly worried. He should have been able to handle this guy by himself. But he's been missing for two hours now. Please, help us find him." Natalie looked stressed, her large eyes were moist, but she wouldn't cry in front of Janette.

Janette removed a small cellular phone from the folds of her dress. She spoke briefly with someone, then hung up. Minutes passed as they waited in silence. Natalie fidgeted with the clip on her medical bag, while Janette played absently with the glass of 'wine' she had before her. The phone rang, startling both women. They heard it even above the loud

background noise of the club. Janette composed herself and took a deep breath. Nat smoothed her hair and concentrated on looking collected. Janette spoke to someone on the other end.

"He's at this location." She produced a pen and scrap of paper and wrote down an address.

"Won't they help us?"

"No, they are younger and do not know him as I do. And, frankly, most of them feel he is no longer one of us."

"Won't **you** help us." Natalie asked of Nick's one time lover.

"He will not accept help from me. Believe me, I have tried."

It was then that Natalie knew something in the past had caused a major rift between Janette and Nick. She felt that Janette was correct in her assessment of the situation.

Janette looked at Schanke. "Here is where you will find Nick. You should go there **alone**."

Schanke took the paper as if he had been awake all along. "How'd you know where he was?"

"Let's just say I have a great many connections," was her reply.

Schanke rose. His first instinct was to call for back up, but something inside him squelched that idea.

"I'm coming with you," Nat interjected.

"No, Nat, this is going to be dangerous," Schanke said.

"Nick may be hurt, Schank. I promise I'll stay well away from the action 'til you've got everything under control." She wasn't pleading, just stating the facts.

"No, you're going back to the morgue, and wait for my call. If you got hurt, Nick would take me out and shoot me."

"Good luck," Janette offered. She let her cool melt a little and she actually meant it.

"Thanks," Schanke said. "I'll need it."



Nick was again remembering that night long ago with LaCroix. He had awakened slowly from a satiated stupor, his head resting on LaCroix's lap. Both of them were covered with blood and gore. LaCroix, a smile on his lips, looked the very essence of evil in the dim candle light. He sat relaxed, his arms thrown back over the lip of a rock out cropping that made a chair of sorts for him in the dark underground cavern. The cavern was lit by rows and rows of candles. Looking down at Nicholas, his malevolence seemed incomprehensible.

"You were the epiphany of death, Nicholas. No darker angel ever existed." He began to laugh, his laughter ringing in the cavernous underground grotto.

Nicholas rose to his elbows to find that they were surrounded by carnage. Nine human beings, men and women, lay in various stages of rigor mortis; lifeless forms ravaged, mutilated and bloodless. The wasted blood dripping from the cavern walls and coagulating on the floor at their feet.

"What have you done...?" But, before Nicholas could finish the question, he knew.

"Done, my dear Nicholas, what I have done is merely stay by your side. I watched and reveled in the completeness of your commitment to evil on this dark night. I've seen you become all that I ever wanted you to be and I've drunk from the same sacred, living cup that you've provided for my enjoyment. Thank you for a night to remember. Come now, we must sleep. Tomorrow we begin anew."

LaCroix withdrew into the deep shadows of the cavern. His sleep would be undisturbed by the heinous sight that lay all around him. Nicholas felt dazed and numb with the realization of what he had done. Going from corpse to corpse, he touched the fragile flesh that only hours ago had been animate and alive. He felt sick inside, sick and unclean. Seizing a thick cloak from one of the bodies, he pulled its bloody remnants about himself and ran out into the sunlight. He wanted to get as far away from all that he had done. That night still haunted him, those innocent faces swam forever in his memory, indelibly etched upon his ancient mind. It was decades before LaCroix tracked him down again.



"You've got to come back now," Red Light said prodding Nick with a sharp knife. "We're going to start again."

Nick found himself staring once again into the icy coldness of those inhuman eyes. Nick's face was as beautiful and pristine as the night he was brought across. The mutilations that Red Light inflicted upon him were gone, his flesh whole once again. But, he felt weak. Nick knew that

the continued flaying of his flesh was draining his energy reserves. He needed to feed, and soon. He was unsure how much his body could withstand before it could no longer regenerate. *Everything has its limits, everything.*



Don drove at break-neck speed to the address Janette had given him.

"Boy, Nick has some weird friends." Schanke said aloud. But then Nick was a little strange, too. Don pushed that fact to the back of his mind and got out of his car. An '82 Ford van was parked outside. *It's not really enough for probable cause*, Schanke thought. He came up to the van and was gratified to find the side panel door was unlocked. With the softest touch possible, he opened the door enough for him to take a look inside. Taking his flashlight he inspected the floor closely. Here was the evidence that made his case for probable cause. There were copious amounts of blood and pieces of the hypoallergenic tape that he had used on Nick's sensitive skin to hold the wire in place.

The blood made Schanke's stomach turn, there was too much of it. He closed the van door silently and moved toward the house. It was locked tight as a drum and there were no lights on anywhere. He was making his second round of all the windows, when he caught the barest hint of light coming from the basement. There appeared to be something covering the inside of the glass. Schank got real close and put his ear to the glass. Faintly, he heard an ungodly scream that made his skin crawl.

"Nick!" Schanke's heart, which had been racing in his chest, was now pounding in his ears. He remembered the mutilated flesh of Red Light's victims and couldn't suppress a shudder. Quickly, he positioned himself at a rear window of the house. Holding his coat over the glass, he broke it out with one strong blow from his gun.

"I hope your soundproofing works both ways," whispered Schanke. Once inside, he searched diligently for the basement door, his gun drawn. Finally, under a stair case, he found what he was looking for. Cautiously, he opened the door and started down a short flight of stairs to an earthen floor. There was no sound now and only dim lighting. His senses were assaulted by the oppressive evil of the room. He stood for a moment, waiting for his eyes to get used to the half light. This was not your average basement. The walls were lined with old rug insulation, a cheap and effective sound dampening device. The place was packed with tools that hung like prize possessions from three of the four walls. He came around a row of shelving and stopped dead in his tracks.

Nick hung from a post in the center of the floor. His face and body were covered with blood which flowed from disfiguring mutilations.



"Schanke, look out," Nick whispered in a ruined voice that wasn't familiar at all.

Schanke whirled in acknowledgment of the warning and was almost caught off guard by the flying force of Red Light's tackle. The blow sent Schank and Red Light rolling on the floor. Miraculously, Schanke came up on his feet with his gun aimed at Red Light.

"Stop! Police!" Schanke shouted.

Red Light, a serrated hunting knife in his hand, ignored the warning and continued forward. Schanke fired once into Red Light's chest. He staggered, but kept coming. Schanke fired a second and third time. Red Light leapt and completely engulfed Schanke.

"Schankel!" Nick yelled at the top of his lungs. His damaged larynx, had healed from the slashing it had taken moments ago.

"Nick, I'm alright." Schanke said as he pulled himself free of Red Light's body. Holstering his gun, he raced to Nick's side.

"Jeez, Nick, I got to get you an ambulance."

"Schank, don't call the paramedics, just take me home."

"You got to be kidding, Nick...home, you need major medical help."

Hurriedly, Schank found a pair of wire cutters among the tools that hung on the wall. As fast as he could, he freed his partner. Nick crumpled into his arms. Schanke eased Nick to the blood splattered floor. His eyes widened in amazement as he saw the dark blood on the floor begin to flow, traveling of its own accord, back into the wounded detective. Schank gazed into Nick's face, disbelieving, and was shocked further as he saw Nick's wounds melt back into wholeness. His eyes were still damaged, but, otherwise, he was healing.

"Don, please, if you care about me, don't take me to a hospital."

"Nick, I don't know what's going on here. I don't understand what's happening to you."

Nick could barely see through his damaged eyes. He closed them and leaned his head on Schanke's shoulder for just a moment. When he opened his eyes they were completely healed. But they weren't the sky blue that Schanke was used to. They were a golden color and there was almost a carnivorous sound to Nick's breathing. Nick could feel the hunger gnawing at his gut and in his mind. He was weak, too weak to take matters into his own hands. He needed Schanke's help. Even after all that he had seen, Schanke hadn't deserted Nick. He still knelt close, supporting him

on the floor. Nick knew that their friendship was strong. He didn't know how strong, but he knew he was going to find out. Nick looked up into Don's eyes.

"Schanke, you've always known that I am very different. I am...I'm a vampire. My body has been regenerating all night from the injuries that Red Light has inflicted upon it. I must feed soon and replace the energy and blood I've lost. I need to get home. I need to get there **now**."

Schanke looked at Nick. He'd never seen him so pale. He'd seen the wounds heal in seconds and the blood move back into his body. Nick was close to losing consciousness. Schanke knew he couldn't hold on much longer.

"Let's go." Schanke said. Throwing Nick's right arm around his shoulders, he assisted his partner to his feet and they left Red Light's chamber of horrors. Putting Nick into the Caddie, Schanke raced to Nick's Gateway flat.

"I can't believe you're taking all of this so calmly," Nick said from the passenger seat.

"I told you once, not too long ago, that you were my partner and I'd take you any way I could get you. You're still my partner, Nick. But, I gotta tell you, I'm having a hard time believing my own eyes."

Schanke made it in record time, coming to a screeching stop outside Nick's building. With Schanke's help, Nick made it up to his fortress. Schank placed him gently on the leather couch and brought him a wine bottle and a plastic bag from the refrigerator. Nick went straight for the human blood, ripping through the tubing at the top of the bag with his fangs and up-ending it as he drank deeply of the life giving fluid. He finished off several bags and looked at Schanke.

"Thanks, Schank," he said. "I've been wanting to share my secret with you for a long time now. It feels good not to have to hide it from you. I respect you too much to have to continue to feed you half truths."

"Now let me get this straight," Schank said as he plopped himself down next to Nick. "You're a vampire, vaporize in the sunlight, can't stand garlic or the sign of the cross." With that Schank made a make shift cross with his two index fingers in front of Nick. Nick's eyes glowed golden as he shielded them with an up raised hand and he hissed at Schank.

"Sorry," Schanke said apologetically.

"It's okay," Nick returned, "I know that it's a great deal to ask of you in so short a time."

"Well, it explains a lot," Don said, leaning back into the couch. "If you don't mind me asking, where do you get the human blood?"

"Nat, makes small withdrawals from the blood bank for me."

"Yeah, who would question her?" Schanke said. "Are you all right now?"

"Yes, but we had better get back to Red Light's lair and call it in," Nick said.

They were in the car headed back to Red Light's basement, when Schank came up with a few more questions.

"Now, explain to me how you get around so quickly sometimes?"

"I can fly."

"Sorry, I asked. Could we sort of concentrate on the case for the next few hours, 'til the paperwork gets done? Then I'll try to take all this info into my brain again."

"Sure, anything you say Schank," Nick replied.



It was a few hours before Natalie, and the rest of the coroners staff, was finished and all the preliminary on scene reports were completed. The death of Red Light, alias Michael Moore Jessup, was deemed a clean shoot by Internal Affairs detectives, after they heard Nick's amended first hand account of what went down. Nat was overjoyed to find Nick safe and unharmed. Nick told her as little as possible about the true events of his night of terror. Nat didn't need to be told about Jessup's twisted mind. She had seen its work first hand. Nick knew it would be sometime, too, before he could forget the terrible feelings of helplessness, the aloneness that Red Light had evoked in him. Everything seemed to be wrapping up well and Nick was happy to have one more friend he could rely on to share his secret.

"Sun will be up soon, Nick," Schanke was now more aware of Nick's parameters, "you'd better think about getting back home."

Nick suddenly remembered something and looked at his watch.

"Don, I still feel a little weak. Would you mind driving me back to the station? I'd like to change back into my street clothes."

"Sure, sure, Nick," Don replied. "You know I forgot all about the female gear. I guess life and death issues take precedent over make-up and a wig." Schanke grinned.

"Thanks again for saving my skin, literally," Nick said. His usual boyish grin was definitely seductive in make-up and at least as broad as Schanke's.

"Nick, you know I'll keep your secret, its safe with me. But, I gotta tell you something, before it makes me crazy."

"What?"

"When I first saw you dressed as a woman. You turned me on."

"I know."

Schanke looked with complete disbelief at his partner.

"How could you have known?"

"Your blood pressure went through the roof."

"You can tell my blood pressure...of course you can. Blood, vampires...I get it. So, you were just stringing me along, right?"

"All the way, big boy," Nick spoke in the French female voice. He took Schanke by the arm and changed his body language to that of a seductive female.

"Knight, not in front of Stonetree and the guys."

Nick withdrew his arm and they both broke up laughing.



Back at the station, Nick convinced Schanke that he needed help disrobing.

"Just come into the ready room, there's no one in here this time of night," Nick said convincingly. "Turn on the light, will you Schank?"

As Schanke switched on the light, nearly forty people yelled surprise and started singing happy birthday. The austere ready room looked festive and bright. Balloons and banners hung everywhere. People crowded in around Schanke and Knight.

Jenny disengaged herself from Myra and went straight for her favorite 'Uncle'.

"Uncle Nick," she said happily as she hugged him.

"Now how do you suppose she knew it was you, Nick?" Schanke said.

"I guess you can fool your partner some of the time, but you can't fool your 'niece' at all. Jenny you stay here with Daddy, while Uncle Nick goes to change. I'll be right back." Nick said as he put Jenny's hand in Don's.

"Oh no you don't," Don said as he grabbed hold of Nick. "You're my partner and you **will** stay and suffer through this joyous occasion, and ultimate humiliation, with me or I will know the reason why."

"Say, who's your new partner?" some straight man yelled from the back of the crowd.

Schanke put his arm around Nick's waist and drew him close in an affectionate embrace.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like you to meet my new partner, Nicky Knight. One of Toronto's finest. Finest what we haven't determined yet, but we're working on it."

Laughter filled the room and Nick had to wonder how he had lived without this mortal nonsense. It felt good to be a part of it.

§

## *No Sound, Just Silence*

By: Todd Parrish

Wind whistles at my door like the baying of wolves  
The cold seeps into my bones without fever  
The moon rises in a sea of clear indigo  
A single candle illuminates my home casting shadows  
There is no time, only the sputtering of the wick  
and the tallow growing lower, lower  
I sit, trying to weep salty tears that will not come  
Asleep are the mortals, safe in their beds  
leaving me only loneliness with their silence  
And how I wish I too could slip into bed with them  
feel their warmth,  
Not feel them shrink from my dead flesh  
and shriek with slack jaws yawning before I must  
finally crush them in my lethal embrace.  
Clasping hands over ears futilely to quell the silent scream,  
Look at what you have become Nicholas!  
No sound, just silence.  
The hours wear on.  
How could I have wanted this eternal hell?  
Hell-fire would be welcome compared to this!  
Yet the yearning goes on:  
to know love  
to hear laughter  
and feel the sun on my face once again.

# What Are We?

By: Star Urioste

The night was bitter cold. Winter's heart had enveloped the city. The streets and thoroughfares held no secrets. The world held no secrets for him. His six foot frame, clothed in the finest leather money could buy, stood out in the biting cold with no sign of discomfort. The silk shirt he wore for its beauty, not its warmth. The platinum buttons, each with a fleur de lis etched upon it, brought remembrances of one of many homes that he had inhabited in his eternal life. His fair skin and hair contrasted starkly with his darkly arching eye brows. His face had an almost angelic appearance; with its white halo of hair; the petulant, sensuous lips, the long aristocratic nose. The eyes, those darkly colorless eyes, betrayed him as no outward sign or affectation could. They glinted with an amoral luster in the moonlight.

He heard the fire's monstrous roar, consuming the night's sounds with its insatiable hunger. Turning to the industrial part of the city, he watched the flames and smoke leap high into the air, seeking a life of their own. There was no purpose in traveling to that place. The flames would boil the blood within the veins of any hapless victim, making it tasteless, lifeless garbage, hardly worth the effort to extract it. No matter, he was curious to see the carnage that these mortals heaped upon themselves. Maybe he would find a tidbit or two. Those who were dying of smoke inhalation might be worth a moment of his time.

He took to the air with the lazy floating movement of an expert flyer; flying without thought or effort. Engulfed in flames, the warehouse was visible from every part of the city. Already the mortals rushed toward the fire in an attempt to control the inferno. He could smell the chemicals billowing into the sky from the explosions that disrupted the clear, cold night with their noxious fumes. Below, the mortals scurried around the fire, as if they were ants around a picnic. From his vantage point, high above, he could see them spraying flame retardant. The fiery beast raged, but the mortals persevered and it weakened, dying in large plumes of white smoke. After several hours, the bulk of the mortals left, leaving only a handful to tend to the smoldering structure. Because of the extreme heat, they could not enter. They were forced to stand and watch, to prevent the fire from resurrecting itself.

The flames had been a barrier to him, but not the heat. He flew into the ravaged top floor and perused the gutted carcass of the building. There was an eerie, surrealistic atmosphere to the place. The steam, rising from the still hot structure, bathed everything in wispy swirling clouds. When the embers were at last dead, the charred remains of several mortals would be found. With the toe of his boot he touched a pile of ash that

revealed itself to be the remnants of vast sums of money. Just below the blackened, useless money lay darkened ingots of gold. Rubbing the sizzling metal surface with his gloved hand, he smiled as it shown again with the brightness of its ancient beauty. He left it where it lay; it was unworthy of his attention.

Turning abruptly, his face a mask of unidentifiable emotion, he sensed that one of his kind lay within these ruins. The People of the Were could feel each other's presence and he knew that a life lay ebbing somewhere at his feet. Over the last few decades, he had been solitary. There had been nothing that called him to sustain another. He saw no reason to change that now. What did it matter to him? He moved away from the steaming, smoking rubble and ascended into the cold, crispness of the night. Looking back over his shoulder, something compelled him to return to where he had stood just moments before. A muffled sound caught his attention, it struck him with its familiarity. Concentrating, he heard the faint beating of the ancient heart. Pushing the smoldering debris aside, he homed in on the fading beat. There, nearly buried under the huge ceiling beams, was the source. Removing the heavy beams required little effort on his part. He found the body jammed into a large metal container, but not large enough to totally protect it. The lower half of the body had taken the brunt of the damage, but had sheltered the upper torso from the ravages of the flames. Extricating the body from its metal shroud, he looked upon the face of an old friend, the youthful face belying the many years this soulless creature had walked the earth.

"You never lacked for courage, did you?" he said, looking at the dying face. "Tonight the cold and the fire retardant kept you from expiring in the flames. But what will bring you back to life now? If I don't help you, you will die slowly, painfully. I should leave you here, condemn you to the mortality that you have sought so arduously for the last few centuries."

LaCroix brought his hand to the cold, ashened face of his long time companion and recent enemy. His eyes closed a fraction. He looked upon the rare beauty of the man in his arms. He remembered the striking intelligence and the dry wit of the immortal that had graced so many centuries of his life. He remembered those endless nights, the dark bloody rites of passage that had brought them so close together, yet so far apart.

"When I can recognize you by the beat of your heart, when that heart calls me back to you, how can I let you die? Mere mortal blood will not sustain you now, only my blood can set the regeneration process back into motion. Your fate is in my hands now, Nicholas, but hasn't it always?"

Nicholas cried out and his ungodly shriek filled the night with his pain; pain that would drive him insane with its bitter cruelty before it slowly destroyed him. The decision made for him, LaCroix lifted the inert form of Nicholas in his steely grip and flew toward his sanctuary, which was not far away...if you could fly.





STAR© 93 WHAT ARE WE?



Nicholas woke in a brilliantly lit room, the light from a thousand candles throwing dancing shadows and shapes onto the cathedral-like walls. He couldn't believe that he was still alive. When the roof had collapsed on him, he'd thought that his death was certain. He remembered the searing pain of the fire on his legs, followed by the oblivion of unconsciousness. He'd stopped the drug dealers from pedaling their poison, but he had nearly paid for it with his life. Now he lay in a huge, comfortable bed, in a cavernous room that looked to be the whole floor of a warehouse. Antiquities from every known age of history, from all over the world, were displayed with impeccable taste and artistic perfection. A museum curator would have given his first born for a fraction of what lay within these walls.

With some difficulty, Nicholas sat up and threw the blankets back from his legs. They were in a state of regeneration. The damage had been severe, but they were mending. He covered them again and lay back down. He wasn't going anywhere soon. Everywhere he looked tall elegant windows reached to the vaulted ceiling, but all the glass was dark and opaque. There was no way of telling if it was day or night.

"It's a special glass that turns dark as soon as sunlight hits it." LaCroix explained as he saw Nicholas studying the windows.

"What is this place?" Nicholas turned in amazement to question his mentor and tormentor.

"This? This pitiful place is my humble abode. But, that's right, you've never been here, have you? This is for you." LaCroix leaned over the bed and held out a crystalline goblet filled with blood.

"I won't drink the blood of murdered mortals, no matter how badly I'm injured..." Nicholas began contemptuously.

"Now, Nicholas," LaCroix scolded him as if he were a child, "this is good for you. This is my blood. You don't think mortal blood would have brought you back from the edge of extinction, do you?"

Realization came to Nicholas.

"You found me in the warehouse?" Nick said in astonishment.

"Yes, you do seem to have a penchant for finding yourself in precarious situations don't you? Drink!" he commanded, thrusting the goblet into Nick's hand.

Reluctantly, Nicholas drained the goblet's contents. It was vampire blood. Mortal blood is sweet and pure. The blood of a vampire is bittersweet, hardy, it's color so much darker than mortal blood ever could be.

"Thank you for bringing me back," said Nick with a pained expression on his face.

"Stay as long as you wish." LaCroix said politely, enjoying Nicholas' predicament. "My door is always open to you, Nicholas."

The tall glass windows started to turn clear, and a magnificent night skyline shown gloriously through. They must be very high indeed to see so far, so clearly.

"LaCroix," Nicholas asked "why? Our relationship died long ago."

"Did it, Nicholas? Did it die or did you abandon it?" LaCroix said with hurt in his voice.

"Do you know what it's like to be alone, Nicholas? Alone for century after countless century? To touch, taste and experience all of life forever, but always alone. Never having anyone with whom to share your life, no one to validate your existence. I created you with one purpose in mind. You were the companionship I craved. You were the mind and body and soul that would follow me throughout time. Together we would travel eternally. You ended my aloneness. You filled my nights with your camaraderie. I watched you grow strong with the power of your immortality. Then, when you reached a completeness, when you had finally become the perfect companion, you left me. Such a betrayal, Nicholas, after all I'd given you. You are part of me. By now, you must accept that fact. No amount of time or distance between us will ever disconnect that bond. We are connected in ways that you can't imagine. We are as inseparable as the stars from the night sky. There is no ending for us, Nicholas, the blood that we've shared binds us irrevocably. You are mine, **forever**."

"Now you will excuse me, won't you? I am famished. Keeping you alive has taken more than a little out of me," LaCroix said as he strode toward one of the windows which slid open at his approach. With that, he turned back toward the open window and was gone. His laughter echoed in Nick's ears for several minutes afterwards.

Nick put the crystal goblet on the bedside stand. It would be a little longer before he could escape to his own lair. He closed his eyes and settled into the soft comfort of LaCroix's bed, but his mind would not let him rest. The long years spoke to him. The time he'd spent with LaCroix had been precious. It was something he tried so hard to forget, but couldn't. He had spent century after century in the shadow of a man

whom he'd grown to despise, yet cared for once. How do you justify your feelings of contempt for him? What do you do with feelings that can't be destroyed or forgotten, feelings that haunt your every thought, every action? How can you hate a man for giving you the gift of eternal life? How do you condone him for taking the light from your life forever?

Nicholas sighed, his sadness overwhelming. Memories flooded his consciousness and he could no more block their passage than he could stop his desire to feed. Mesmerized by the thoughts and images that passed through his mind, he slipped from the present into the dark past. Perhaps he was eternally damned to relive his past. Possibly that was his personal purgatory. He remembered with cold clarity all the many lives he had touched and taken, he would give all that he was, to forget.

The cold winter wind blew through the window before it automatically closed. His own skin, being not much warmer than the wind, did not feel winter's touch. With LaCroix's blood revitalizing him, as it had so many centuries ago, he felt the blood bond quicken in his veins once more, reminded anew that LaCroix would continue to be a source of discomfort for him. Nicholas pledged himself to the cause of justice, hoping his 'bond' with LaCroix was not as strong as the 'bond' he had forged among his mortal friends, with humanity itself.



## *The Ancient*

By: Gina Alkazian

He moved through the crowd a cold stranger among mortals.  
A golden god, of flaxen main and skin of bronze  
He towered over the host striding in arrogant grace  
His very strangeness made him compelling to all who beheld him  
Eyes devoid of color, devoid of emotion, devoid of mercy  
gazed out of a face chisled from stone.  
A more perfect man no discerning eye had ever encountered  
Yet his beauty hid a terrible secret,  
A secret so dark the it made angles weep.

For this was the Ancient.  
The King of our kind,  
First Blood.

I wanted to flee to run,  
But his mellinia old power kept me rooted to my place.  
A unhold gargoyl, frozen forever in the face of my creator.  
He turned to me feeling my eyes on him.  
I had not meant to draw his evil attention,  
yet as he caught my eye, I saw him smiled.  
A strange twich of his lips which carried no warmth.  
I was young then, and eager in my Vampiric powers,  
Yet here was one whose power knew no boundries.

For this was the Ancient.  
The King of our kind.  
First Blood.

His darkness reached for me,  
Engulfing and devouring my resistance,  
Reveling in my surrender.  
I would be his choosen.  
His deciple,  
His General.  
Drawing the wayward and forsaken to his cause,  
We would build an army of the undead!  
His arms closed around me  
and his evil caressed what was left of my soul.  
I would be the strongest now  
and rule the others an iron fist.

For this was the Ancient.  
The King of our kind.  
First Blood...  
And I LaCroix was his.

# Sidney's Tale

By: Star Urioste

Nick watched with great misgivings as Natalie closed his elevator door and left. The brown eyed beauty was on her way to a week long forensics convention. Coincidentally, she was informed that her apartment would be painted and there were some minor structural changes to be made to keep the building up to the city's fire code. All this left poor Sidney with not too many options. He could go into a cattery or he could visit Nick's Bed and Supper Inn until his mistress came home. Natalie opted for the latter, saying Sidney would fair better with Nick than with strangers.



Nat had spent her last night with Nick and Sidney, making sure that the transition was smooth. Earlier that evening, Nat had given him a long lecture on the care and maintenance of cats. All the while, Nat had spoken intelligently to the cat of the week they would be apart. As if he understood, the cat sat in Nat's lap and listened intently.

"Now, you have to read the body language of a cat as well as the sounds they make," Nat explained in that same soothing tone to Nick. "Don't stare directly at him, close your eyes a bit when your gaze meets his. That's more friendly. He likes to be talked to. Tell him what's happening and he usually doesn't get frightened or upset about it. He's pretty easy going."

"Why is he sitting with his tail draped around your arm?" Nick asked.

"That's his way of saying he likes and respects me. Kittens drape their tails over their mother's back as a sign of affection. It's just an extension of that mother-child display." Placing a small bag onto Nick's coffee table, Nat opened it and explained the contents.

"This is his brush, he really needs to be brushed everyday, that long hair you know. This jar has his favorite treats and the rest of these things are his toys. And this jar," she said holding another jar filled with green herbs, "this is his catnip. He likes to get high regularly."

"My kind of cat," Nick gave Nat a friendly wink and she threatened to hit him with the jar.

"Be nice to Sidney or I'll have you up on charges of corrupting a minor. After all, he's only four."

"Looks like he's pretty corrupted already," Nick replied wickedly, hefting the large jar of catnip.

They both had to laugh at that one, and Sidney merely took it all in stride and stepped lightly from Nat's lap to the floor.



Nick's handsome good looks were unmarred by his disheveled appearance. He had just gotten out of bed. Sitting on the couch in the living room, drinking cow blood from his favorite crystal, he watched his new room mate with fascination. Sidney didn't seem too upset about being here. He even came over to Nick occasionally and rubbed his whiskers against Nick's silk pajamas.

"Meow," Sidney said in a mellow cat voice.

"That wasn't too annoying," Nick was pleased with his new room mate. "I guess you want something to eat, too."

Nick went over to a large paper bag on the kitchen counter and pulled out a small can. He opened the can with his can opener. It was the first time since he'd moved into this flat that he'd remembered using it. He took a whiff of the contents and nearly lost his breakfast. The chemicals, hormones and foul fishy aroma sent Nick's stomach into spasms.

"How can she feed you this stuff?" he asked the patient cat at his feet.

"Listen, I know a place where we can get you something more wholesome, and a great deal better tasting, than this garbage." Nick threw the contents of the can down his insink-o-rator and flushed the offending food stuff down the drain.

It was Nick's vacation as well and he didn't have to report for work. So, after taking a quick shower and dressing, he put on a light silk jacket and took Sidney in his arms. Remembering Nat's instructions, he told Sidney exactly what was going to happen, but he said it in the 'Blood Tongue'. He wanted to make sure Sidney enjoyed his first flight and wouldn't get stressed out and give him a bad time. Even with all the preparation, Sidney kept a white clawed grip on Nick's arm all the way to their destination.

In terms of flight, it was fairly close, but the meadow was away from the city lights. The moonlight shone brightly and there was the normal nocturnal activity of bugs and beasts of all shapes and sizes.

Nick didn't land, but skimmed the surface of the ground slowly. As if on cue, a small field mouse bolted in front of them. Nick plucked the rodent from the ground and held the wiggling body a safe distance from Sidney.

"One of these days, when you've got a year or two, Sid, I'll have to tell you about my exploits at the Arctic Circle. How I was reduced to sucking these little fur balls to stay alive for a brief period of time. But, let's not talk about the subject now." He said with good humor. "I'm not interested in reliving that tiny portion of my personal history."

Nick could barely contain the cat as Sid attempted to get to the mouse in his hand. He set the mouse and cat down on the ground at the same time and the chase was on. The mouse won, exiting down a familiar hole.

"Well, we'll just have to try again won't we." Nick said with patience.

By the third attempt, Sidney had worked the kinks out of his strategy and caught the mouse, breaking the mouse's neck cleanly and he began to eat. The cat wasn't aware of how he'd impressed Nick.

"That was a clean kill," he said as the cat devoured his supper. "I admire someone who doesn't play with his food." The eight hundred year old vampire was equally impressed with the meadow that had been Sidney's classroom.

"You know, Sidney, this place has possibilities." He was looking at it with an artist's eye. Sidney finished his meal and went exploring. Nick wasn't concerned that the cat would get lost. He could follow the animal's whereabouts by just listening to it's heart beat.

"Yes, I think we'll do a water color nightscape of this meadow for Nat while she's away. That will be a great welcome home present for her, don't you think?"

Nick looked down at his feet. Sidney was staring up at him. Nick closed his eyes a little remembering Nat's instructions. Sidney closed his eyes a little too and started to purr unobtrusively. Nick smiled and sighed deeply.

"I think I like you, too," he said, "and I think your mistress has some undue influence over me, or I wouldn't be talking to you as if you understood what I was saying."

Shaking his head at himself, Nick picked up the cat and talked pleasantly to him as they flew home.





STALE © 1993 SIDNEY STALE

By the third night, flying to the meadow was a ritual that was deeply ingrained in Sidney's cat brain. As Sidney went exploring, working off his supper of lizard and mouse, Nick took out the picture he was working on from a carrying case that held all his supplies.

Creating brought Nick a certain kind of peace. Not being able to procreate, creating with his hands and mind gave him a certain sense of continuance. Being immortal didn't assure him immortality. Death was just as haunting a specter to him as it was to the mortals of the world. But creating was such a wonderful feeling. He could get lost in the act of creating, just as he became lost in the act of feeding; it had that much of a hold over him. Nick finally looked up from his work and was startled to see the night sky lightning.

"Sidney. I think I've over stayed my welcome." Packing up his art supplies and grabbing hold of Sidney, Nick took to the air. "We're not going to make it, Sid," he said, concern coloring his voice.

He started looking at the landscape beneath him and felt the smallest bit of panic rising to the surface of his usual calmness. He had to find shelter fast. Then, something caught his eye from far below. There, nestled in a stand of trees, was something that might do. Floating down, Nick found it to be an abandoned work shed. He entered the structure and found everything covered with thick layers of dust. Old, rusty tools and crumbled boxes of nails indicated this shed had not been used for years. It was dark inside and it looked as though it would serve his purpose. Not wanting Sidney to escape while he slept, Nick checked the perimeter of the small shed. Finally, satisfied that they would both be safe, he put Sidney down and secured the door so that no one would disturb his precious sleep.

"Well, Sid, I know it's not what we're used to, but I think we can manage for one day." Nick continued to speak openly to the cat. Nick chose a corner of the shed and lay down on the dark soil floor. Sidney came up to him and stood close to his head.

"That's right, Sidney, you watch over this old vampire and I'll see you when I wake up."

Nick slept more lightly than he normally would have behind the heavy security of his home. He slept dreamlessly. He woke with a start to find Sidney standing on his chest. The usually mellow cat stared at him, wide-eyed and restless. He was kneading his claws painfully into Nick's chest.

"Sid," Nick started to chastise the feline, when he glanced up over the cat's head. What looked like an old, heavy picket gate hung precariously above him. Nick rolled immediately out of the way as it crashed down to

the floor where he had been sleeping just moments ago. The sharp, pointed edge of the heavy, wooden gate was now jammed several inches into the packed soil. The gate had been stored in the rafters of the shed and had chosen that particular moment to fall. Nick protectively covered his heart, which would have been impaled by the falling gate.

"I'm sure you didn't have anything in mind when you woke me, Sid, but thanks anyway." Nick said as he sat in the soil, shaken just a bit. Sidney meandered around the shed, constantly vigilant. Neither one slept for the rest of the day and the night didn't come too soon.



Natalie let herself into Nick's flat. She was pleased to find Nick and Sidney relaxed and comfortable on the couch watching an old movie.

"Well it's good to see the men in my life enjoying each other's company."

"Welcome home," Nick said getting up from the couch and giving Nat a big hug.

"Looks like it wasn't as bad as you thought it would be?"

"You know, Nat, I have to tell you, it was better than I expected."

"Great, glad to hear it."

"Here, sit down, we were expecting you." Nick escorted her to the couch and brought out a bowl of popcorn.

"Were you eating this!" she asked immediately.

"Sorry, I just made it for you." Nick replied.

"Well, a gal can hope, can't she?" Natalie was brought back to reality by the insistent pushing of a soft wet nose. Sidney rubbed against her, wanting her full attention.

"Sidney, how did you and Uncle Nick get along. You look great. He didn't try to eat you did he?" she questioned her furry companion humorously, giving Nick a suspicious look as she spoke.

"How could you even think I would do that to this marvelous beast," Nick fabricated a deep feeling of anguish at her words.

"But just to show I bear you no ill will, I want to offer this welcome home gift to you."

Nick brought out a tripod with a large rectangular shape on it, all of which was covered with a cloth.

"For you Nat, from Sidney and me."

Nick pulled the cloth away to reveal a nightscape, done in exquisite watercolor. A meadow, lined with mature trees, glowed in the moonlight. Nick stood to the left of center in the field. Something clung to his neck. Nat stood and looked closer at the picture. There was Sidney, perched on Nick's shoulder, his tail thrown around Nick's neck in what could only be deemed a gesture of friendship. The signature at the bottom of the painting read Nicholas Knight. And, just above his name, Nat could see the dark paw print of a cat.

"It's beautiful, Nick," she said. "But do you really want me to believe that you and Sidney are that close?"

"Watch," Nick replied and he went to a nearby chair and took up his jacket. He put it on and zipped up the zipper. At the sound of the zipper, Sidney bounded from the couch into Nick's arms, then up to his shoulder and draped his tail around Nick's neck.

"He's ready," Nick said proudly.

"Ready for what?" Nat asked, a look of puzzlement on her face.

"He's logged quite a few hours of flight time, since you've been gone...."

"Flight time!" Nat looked incredulous.

"And, I've taken the liberty of changing his diet too. You know that garbage you were feeding him wasn't any good at all."

Sidney could see the writing on the wall and jumped from Nick's shoulder to the floor, heading for parts unknown.

"You did what?" Natalie was on her feet and in Nick's face. "And just what does he eat now, Nick?" Nick could see that she was livid and he backed slowly away from her and into the kitchen. She was right next to him and he barely had the courage to turn and open the freezer. Removing a large brown paper bag he took out a small freezer bag and handed it to her.

"What is this?" she said getting hotter with every passing second.

"Ah, this particular supper is a mixture of mouse and lizard, his favorite." He said almost apologetically,

Her already large eyes got larger and she dropped the bag back into Nick's outstretched hand.

"And just how am I, a lowly forensics pathologist, supposed to come up with mouse-lizard meals after this bag runs out?"

"No problem, Nat, I can procure these meals from the same people who provide my cow blood. They're very discreet and totally reliable."

"Nick Knight...." She began.

He could see the melt down coming and he knew he had to defuse the situation before it got any worse.

"...and just what else has transpired while I was gone?"

"I think the rest can wait until after you've calmed down, don't you?" He was being very charming and attentive as he walked her back to the couch and sat her down. Sitting down next to her, and placing the bowl of popcorn in her lap, he lifted one of the exploded kernels and gently popped it into her mouth. She lifted a hand full and threw it at him. He took the abuse and gave her one of his most captivating smiles. Then, he broke out laughing and she couldn't help herself as she joined in.

"So tell me how was your trip?" She relaxed into his embrace, unable to resist the irresistible charm of the vampire in her life.

"Actually, it was pretty un...." She didn't finish, because out of no where, Sidney appeared and jumped into Nick's lap. He made a thorough inspection of said lap and lay down. He closed his eyes partially as if ready to listen, half heartedly, to Nat's story.

"I think he likes you." Nat said.

"You don't know the half of it," Nick said as he drew Nat closer.

"I should have gotten you two together a long time ago." Nat said as she ruffled the fur of her favorite feline and kissed the cheek of her favorite vampire. They both purred back at her.

§

# The Darkest Knight

By: Gina Alkazian

Natalie Lambert stretched the kinks from her shoulders with an almost audible crack, and sighed. Another long night of gun battles, muggings and gang activity had left seven bodies on non-descript stretchers waiting for her examination.

*Ah, the Rites of Spring*, thought the spunky little red-head. Nat stood up and wandered over to her desk, dropping the file she had been using on top. She sank into her comfortable chair, which was a Christmas gift from Nick. She was grateful he had thought to give it to her. Of course, Natalie pondered, it could have been the ad for the furniture sale with the exact chair she had wanted circled in red that had given him the idea. *Naw.*

The half formed smile on her lips died when she again caught sight of the shrouded bodies laying in attendance. Nat groaned. She really had wanted to get home early tonight. **He** needed her. Natalie turned towards the small body resting on the metal examination table. She steeled her emotions at the sight of the little girl who, from her angle, appeared to be no more than sleeping. But grizzly reality was on the other side.

Nat closed her eyes as a tight lump formed at the back of her throat. She remembered the look on Nick's face when she arrived on the scene.

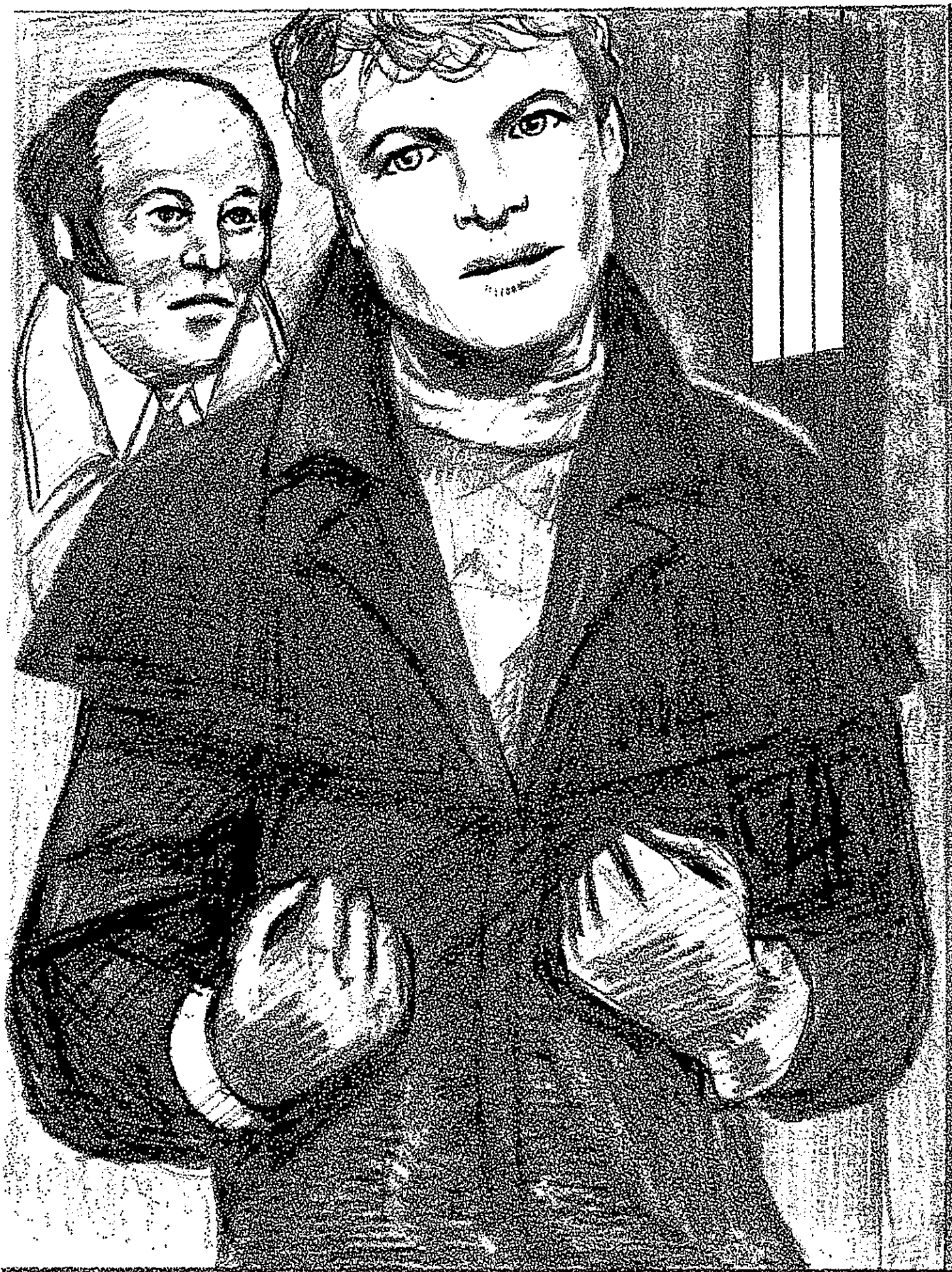
If a Vampire could cry, then Natalie had seen Nick as close to tears as his kind could get. He had just stood over the body staring at it. Feet braced apart, hands clenched at his sides, he had been a living statue of agony. The sight had not only affected her, but Nick's veteran partner, Don Schanke, as well.

The young coroner got up and moved back to the table. Nat tenderly arranged the child's hair and the sheet to hide most of her crushed skull and mangled body, as a tear escaped her tight control. "I've even forgotten your name, little one. It was Angel or Angie, or something like that."

Her lips trembling, salty tears invaded her mouth as she stood over the child. Natalie had a sudden thought. She reached up to unhook the small silver crucifix that her mother had given her when she was eighteen. Knight had warned her never to take it off, not even with him, but she thought Nick would understand and appreciate her gesture.

She placed the talisman on the girl's breast and whispered, "God Bless you, little one. At least there will be no more pain." Her hands shaking with her emotion, Natalie drew the sheet over the child's head.





THE DARKEST KNIGHT © '93 S.R. URIOSTE

She turned quickly and grabbed a tissue from her desk, gratified by her lack of professionalism. *At least I can still cry.* It was her job to deal with the bodies unemotionally, but it was good to know she hadn't become totally immune. *No one should be totally immune.* She thought of Nick. Perhaps that was why she was crying. Her ancient friend had no tears to shed, so she wept for him.

"It must be a lonely job." The deep cultured voice caused Natalie to jump and spin around.

The owner of the voice, a tall elegantly clad man apparently in his late thirties, stood just inside the double doors of the examination room. From her angle, the intruder looked very large and ominously disquieting. Natalie couldn't quite reason why, but she was afraid of this man.

Her hand went immediately to the phone receiver to call for assistance. The Toronto Police Department always posted a guard outside. "Hello, this is Doctor Natalie Lambert....Hello...Hello, Sid."

"If you're waiting for that over-weight blob of a security guard, I think you're going to have a long wait." The handsome intruder smiled, but, even his good-looks could not hide the traces of malice glinting in his blue eyes.

His hair color, or lack there of, only accentuated his exotic looks. He detached himself from the door jam and sauntered towards her. He was dressed completely in black, Natalie noticed, from his steel-tipped leather boots and leather pants to his black silk shirt and long fur-lined leather split coat. His whole outfit was easily worth five months of Natalie's pay.

She kept staring at his shirt, clutching the phone receiver in front of her like a shield. She couldn't move or think. The morgue was deserted. Her assistant, having gone for food, wouldn't be back for at least a half hour.

A cold hand lifted her chin, the thumb gently brushing her cheek. She had felt hands like this before; hands as cold as the grave, as lifeless as death, Vampire hands. Cobalt blue eyes captured her own with indomitable power.

Natalie could not hold back the shiver as it passed through her body. The malevolent creature held her, it was all she could do to stay standing and not fall into his arms in surrender.

"Good," the apparition purred, "You are controlling your fear, but it is still there isn't it, Doctor Lambert?"

He smiled, but the warmth never reached the cold depths of his dead eyes. "I would like you to be my guest at a party in honor of a mutual friend



of ours. It's a surprise party, and I won't take no for an answer. Please say you'll come," he whispered, his lips grazing her own. He stood suddenly very close.

"Go to hell," Natalie managed to get out, though her voice sounded breathless even to her own ears.

The Vampire leaned back with an exaggerated.bored expression, "Been there, done that."

His predator's smile returned in full force as he gathered an unresisting Natalie into the circle of his arms."I must say, you are a pretty little thing. Nicholas always had good taste. I wonder if you taste good, little Natalie."

Natalie's eyes widened and her fear escalated when she saw the hint of fangs peeking out from between red lips. Her arms and legs hung useless as the creature grabbed a fist full of her hair and pulled exposing her vulnerable neck. His hot tongue licked her throat over the carotid artery causing revulsion and arousal at the same time.

Natalie closed her eyes and said a silent Hail Mary as she felt her death upon her. Her assailant paused.

"But that wouldn't be polite, now would it?" His false sincerity washed over Natalie like sewer water, making her skin crawl."We must not begin on the main course until the guest of honor has arrived." He jerked her around, and steered her toward the doors.

Once outside, he gathered Natalie close once more and leaped into the velvety blackness of the night sky. Natalie felt the length of his hard body pressed to her back. His arm, a band of steel around her waist, held her as if she were as light as a child. And somewhere in the darkest place, a place no one wants to admit to, she responded to his touch with desire. She had no idea who this person was. Perhaps an enemy from Nick's past or an ancient friend, Natalie could care less, all she knew was that she had to keep her fear under control.

This Vampire seemed to feed on her fear, relishing the terror he could evoke. Natalie knew if she wished to live through the night, she would have to make it hard for him to get what he desired. It would take every ounce of her will power, but she would be damned if this bastard would see her fear again.

But when the creature spoke, Natalie broke her own vow."By the by I don't believe I introduced myself...I am LaCroix."

\*\*\*

Nick flung the ancient Etruscan urn across his apartment. The fragile pottery literally disintegrated into the dust from where it was retrieved. The early evening mists already rising from the river gave the moonlight an ethereal look. Nicholas Knight, born Nicholas St. Gerard in the year of our Lord 1198 AD, paced his downtown loft with angry jerky strides.

*Why is it always the innocents who suffer. Why?!* Nick raged on to the heavens, begging for an answer but knowing that none would be forthcoming. That path was closed to him. He had shut the door himself when he, in a moment of despair and doubt, let LaCoix seduce him into the Dark Life.

Earlier Nick and his partner, Don Schanke, had been working on a missing persons case connected to a homicide. The victim, Vanessa Tate, a single mother working in a hotel, had been found beaten to death in one of the hotel rooms. It was later discovered that, two days earlier, she had filed a report, stating her five year old daughter had disappeared from her back yard.

It was a tough case. All evidence had pointed to the woman's ex-husband, but Justin Tate had a air-tight alibi. Nick berated himself for being too slow with piecing together the facts. This time it had cost a little girl her life.

Nick's pacing took him to the cold brick wall near the window of his expensive flat. He slammed his head into the hard surface, his inhuman strength causing a deep crack in the hard brick to appear. Again he slammed his head, trying in that one motion to banish the sight of the small, twisted, jumble of flesh and bones that had once been Angelica Tate.

The more Nick tried to forget, the more he remembered. *It's so unfair*, he thought. Angelica's short life had barely begun while his was centuries long.

He felt the skin of his forehead split. There was no pain, which was a strange sensation he had never quite got used to. To feel ones bones breaking and mending, but experience no physical discomfort was odd. The closest thing Nick could compare it to was a gentle tugging and pulling, as if someone was rubbing his skin over-hard.

He pushed himself away from the wall not bothering to look back at the damage he had caused, or the blood stain on the wall, and collapsed on to his sofa.

The apartment, like the man, reflected a diverse taste and style, from the ancient vase that lay in ruins on the highly polished hard wood floor, to the 1967 Harley Davidson motorcycle in the corner. The huge vaulted ceiling structure would have been impossible on a Police Officer's pay but Nick was no ordinary Cop.

Over the centuries he had accumulated great stores of wealth. It would have surprise his co-workers to learn just how wealthy he was. Even his closest human friend, Natalie Lambert, had no idea of his net-worth. If the truth was known, Nick could have outbid an oil sheik. Yet for all his vast fortune, he preferred the simple life. He might own the building, yet his loft was the most sparsely furnished.

*If only I could have got to her sooner.* Two hours, Natalie had said, only two hours earlier and the little girl would have been alive. **TWO HOURS!** Two hours was but a heartbeat in Nick's life span, but at the moment they felt like an eternity.

Nick closed his eyes and rested his head back against the black leather cushion. Was he forever going to be too late? Over a hundred and twenty years ago he had ceased the killing of innocents to prolong his already lengthy existence. He now tried to help them. Keeping his own Beast at bay, Nick fought to rectify the wrongs caused by the beast in others.

Nick was an outsider, even to his own kind. *All, that is, except, Jeanette.* He had never betrayed those of his blood, but he couldn't condone their killing either. And tonight he felt like the loneliest person on the face of the Earth. His separateness stuck to him like the tenacious tentacles of an octopus, squeezing what little humanity he had left. He reeked of the death that was his unlife, and no amount of washing would ever devolve the stench of what he was; Vampyr, Nosferatu, or the dozen other names that his kind was known by.

Nicholas felt her presence, before he heard the elevator arriving at his loft. He had never revealed his security code to her, but there were few places that were inaccessible to Jeanette. He turned, as the heavy door slid open, and put on his most charming smile. Jeanette always mocked his forays into self pity, so Nick did his best to hide his emotions from her.

*She used to be so understanding,* Nick thought sadly.

He schooled his features and casually brushed a hand through his hair, touching his forehead for the wound he knew would be barely discernible.

She floated toward him with the ease and grace of a panther. Her blood red lips were slightly parted, revealing the elongated canines of their kind.

"Hello Nicola," she purred. The heightened color in her cheeks bore evidence that she had fed this night and fed well. He was excited and repulsed at the same time. In a few days, when the body of some transient she had feasted upon was pulled from the River, he would feel the guilt, but now it was different.

After almost a century of abstinence from human blood, Nick still found the thought of the *hunt* exciting. He understood what drove Jeanette to prowl the night, the same drive rested in his own soul as well, but he couldn't understand the death. If Jeanette and LaCroix had understood that about him, they would have never made him one of their Blood. As his *old* friend used to say, "You're a terrific guy, Nick, but you make a lousy Vampire."

Jeanette floated over to Nick's small kitchen beneath the stairs to the second floor and opened the fridge door. Several bottles of dark red liquid stood conspicuously alone on the almost empty shelves. She glanced back over her shoulder with those liquid blue eyes of hers and smiled. "May I?"

Nick crossed the room and took the bottle she had lifted from the fridge out of her hand and returned it to its place. He closed the door and leaned against it, successfully blocking Jeanette's way.

"You look like you've had enough." Nick's voice dripped sarcasm. He didn't like it when his old friends, either human or Vampire, made themselves at home in his place.

"You can never have enough," Jeanette answered in that low dark voice of hers spiced with the barest French accent.

"One drop, is too much," Nick spat-out with more heat than he had intended. She knew this kind of conversation bothered him. Nick surmised that was the reason she always brought it up.

"Oh Nicola, you're so puritanical and in a Vampire that is a contradiction in terms."

He wasn't going to let her bate him. "What do you want, Jeanette?"

"Always the Gallant, aren't you dear Nicki." Her superior smile faded and her luminous eyes took on a haunted look. "But, I didn't come here to argue with you." She moved further into the room, the tenseness in her body discernible to Nick's preternatural senses.

He followed her into the room and took a seat in a wing back leather chair in front of a cold fireplace. Jeanette lounged on the sofa across from him, her long sculptured nails digging into her palms. He felt her agitation and fear. *Her Fear?!*

There were very few things that drove terror into the heart of a Vampire. Nick felt the wave of fear wash over him, leaving its sickening residual lodged in his soul, or what was left of his soul.

"Tell me," he urged, when he saw her hesitate.

"It's impossible," she began her eyes wild, "You said he died by fire...." She leaned forward clutching at his hand in desperation, "You saw him vanish!"

Nick's ancient heart began to pound in his chest. She couldn't mean what he thought. Nick lunged forward, grasped her shoulders, and dragged Jeanette off the couch. His powerful fingers bit deeply into her pale cold flesh.

"Jeanette...tell me!"



LaCroix gazed down upon the beauty asleep on his bed. Her dark auburn hair, cascading wildly across the silk Persian pillow, caught the light of hundreds of candles. The healthy hue of her sun-kissed skin radiated warmth and life. He could smell the spicy sweet aroma of her blood -- an intoxicating elixir that called to his kind like a siren's song to a sailor.

LaCroix shook his head at his fanciful musings. In more than sixteen hundred years existence he had never waxed poetic and was too ancient to start now.

*I'm sounding as disgustingly sentimental as Nicholas.*

He moved to the edge of the bed and sat down, his eyes gently caressing the young woman. She was beautiful in an understated way. Wide deep-set eyes the color of azure seas, he remembered, had the power to look into a person's soul. Knowing the modern propensity toward skepticism, LaCroix was sure Natalie Lambert wasn't even aware of her gift, let alone how to consciously use it.

But she did have the power. He had felt it when he had watched her tend the small body on her examination table. He had attempted to mock her tears, but the moment she turned to look at him, he hadn't been able to follow through with his plan. Perhaps he wouldn't kill her when his little game was over. Perhaps he would keep Natalie with him. At least until he grew tired of her.

A smile touched the corners of his pale lips as he slid his hand up one of Natalie's stocking-clad legs. She moaned softly, shifting her position on the bed, unconsciously allowing him access to her most private parts.

The invitation was too great and, even if it wasn't, LaCroix never denied himself pleasure, in whatever form it took. His other hand joined the first as they moved past the young woman's knees and along the inside

of her thighs. He found her warmth through her panty hose and smiled. It seemed that Natalie was one of those women who wore nothing beneath her stockings.

Her scent assailed his heightened senses, as his fingers caressed the dampness between her legs. It had been a long time since he touched a woman this way. LaCroix was so old and powerful, he no longer needed to coax a response from a victim; one would surrender with just a look.

LaCroix's mouth began to water at Natalie's ready response to his fondling. With an eagerness that startled him, he reached higher and eased the transparent hose down Natalie's shapely legs. She stirred a little, almost waking, but LaCroix quickly exerted mind pressure and she settled back into a deeper sleep.

A strange longing gripped him as he gazed at her exposed flesh. He sat up quickly, angry with himself for letting the little nothing affect him so. He could rip out her throat and drain her dry in a matter of seconds. *She's nothing special.*

The scent of her arousal drew him back down to her side. He gazed mesmerized by the ginger curls at the apex of her shapely thighs. His hand moved toward the sweet wet warmth he knew was hidden by the downy thatch. His fingers, damp from his earlier explorations slid over her slick folds, as soft cries of pleasure erupted from her slightly parted lips. Her body arched from the bed, trying to fit more closely to LaCroix's probing hands. A new wetness drenched the hair hiding her woman's core of pleasure.

LaCroix felt his body tightening at Natalie's ecstasy. Her desire washed over him, through him, heightening his own excitement and **his hunger**. If he didn't stop now, this delicate little flower would ruin all his carefully laid plans.

He couldn't bate Nicholas with a corpse. He wanted his young disciple to be present when he drained the life from Doctor Lambert's beautiful body. He wanted Nicholas to be cringing in frustrated anguish, frozen in fury as the woman's life blood flowed into LaCroix's ancient veins. That would be his revenge, his triumph.

A soft moan escaped Natalie's hypnotic induced sleep. LaCroix quickly withdrew his fingers. He didn't want her to wake-up again. He sat back staring at the wetness on his fingers. Her essence was so strong it was like a physical thing hammering at his senses.

*One taste, just one taste*, he thought, *What could it hurt?* He stuck his hand inside his mouth and began to suck the wetness from his fingers. His body trembled as the musky taste filled his mouth and trickled down his throat. He felt his eyes begin to dilate and his fangs extend as the flavor of the woman became a part of him.

He got up and backed away from the bed, not trusting himself near his precious captive. He needed to feed again, before he took the responsive little bitch who was playing him like a green youth just out of the school room. He moved further away from the bed, his hunger and desire raging through him like a typhoon, churning up things better left buried. He would take his pleasure from this woman, but in his own time and in his own way.

He reached the entrance to the cave he called sanctuary. His whispered voice filled the silence of his tomb-like refuge, "Later, mon amore...Later we will share the Dance of Death." He turned and became one with the Darkness, his first love. His only love.



Natalie came awake with a start. The nightmare had been so vivid, yet when she tried to recall it, the details faded from her mind like an old photo when exposed to the sun.

A half-formed scream rose in her throat, as the events of the previous night came back with startling clarity. *Oh God! Am I dead?* Her hand flew to her neck. Nat breathed a sigh of relief at the unbroken skin. She lived, at the moment.

Disorientated, she gazed at the deep burgundy and black woven bedspread covering her. *Where did this come from*, Natalie asked as she rubbed sleep from her eyes. Natalie pushed the tangle of auburn hair from her face and took note of her surroundings.

The touch of cold air on her bare skin gave Natalie the first indication that she was naked. She clutched the heavy fabric to her bosom as she tried to peer through the gloom. The last thing she could remember was a pair of sky-blue eyes gazing out from a malevolently handsome face.

Nat found herself in the center of an enormous four poster. One lone candle burned on an antique commode next to her. Its meager light barely reached beyond the end of the bed. Squinting, Natalie discovered, didn't help. She scrambled off the large bed, dragging the exotic cover with her. Natalie hissed as her bare feet recoiled from the freezing stone floor.

Perhaps the Vampire was gone. Perhaps she would be able to make her escape. If she could just get outside, Natalie figured, she could reach the nearest town and call for help.

The need to be away enveloped her. She ran across the floor to feel the walls for some kind of entrance, the lack of illuminations hampering her efforts. Natalie search proved fruitless, and she almost cried in

frustration. It seemed that there was no way in and no way out of the cave or whatever it was.

*Damn!* She winced in pain, as her knee connected with a heavy chest at the foot of the huge bed. Natalie rubbed her injured leg as her eyes tried to penetrate the darkness. Her vision began adjusting to the dimness. Vague shapes took on more clarity.

With escape impossible, Natalie decided to concentrate on finding some kind of protection against the monster who held her captive. Her first assumption had been correct. She was in some kind of cave. The rock walls were thick and uneven. The whole place reminded Natalie of an Egyptian tomb she had once explored with an over-sexed Anthropology student, than a natural formation. It certainly wasn't man-made or...*Vampire made.*

Natalie began a systematic scan of the dim room in search of her clothes. If she was going to be rescued, it wasn't going to be bare-ass naked.

A shiver passed through Natalie's slender body. If the creature who kidnapped her was in fact LaCroix, then she was in serious danger. Nick had told her enough about his evil mentor over the years that the thought of him scared Natalie witless.

She shook off the unproductive fear and put her scientific mind to work. Nat had always prided herself on being able to look at a situation logically. She knew that if she kept her head, she would make it out with her skin and her *soul* intact.

Crossing the room quickly, Natalie began searching through a row of armoires at the far side of the chamber. The dark wood was pitted and scratched with tell-tale signs of heavy use. Tucking the edge of the coverlet between her breasts, Natalie placed both hands on the knob of the first cabinet and yanked. At first the doors didn't seem to want to open. Then the hinges, screaming their protest like a crazed banshee, began to move.

Men's clothing from a dozen different time periods lay in a heap next to Armani suits, like a crazed costumer's private collection. Several cabinets later, she came upon an arsenal of death. Jewel encrusted daggers and sabers of Spanish steel lay jumbled among muskets and World War II German Lugars. She turned away from the wardrobe with an unsettling feeling. Natalie needed no reminder that her absent host's purpose in life was death; she had seen it in the heartlessness of his eyes.

Natalie felt a slight shift of air. She was no longer alone. Clutching the cover more tightly to her body, she edged back towards the bed. Every shadow and crevice became ominous and threatening.



Come on Nat, get a grip. He wants you to be afraid. Don't give the bastard what he wants. With a casualness she hardly felt, she straightened and sauntered over to the bedside commode and picked up the candle. If her unseen captor wanted to putz around, that was his business, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her squirm. Natalie got back on the bed, holding the candle in front of her, she took comfort in the fragile light. She edged back, until she came up against the ornately carved headboard.

"If you're trying to scare me, it's not working." Natalie congratulated herself on the flippant tone of her voice. This was an Oscar winning performance. The hair on the back of her neck tingled as she felt his evil gaze take in her disheveled naked appearance. *Jeez, I'm sittin here worrying about how I look to this guy. I must be nuts.*

"How long have I've been here?" Natalie demanded wanting to assume an aggressive posture in the conversation. *Don't show any weakness, or he'll go for the jugular.* She heard the words in her mind, almost as if someone had spoken in her ear.

Scanning the room again, Natalie tried to determine where LaCroix was hidden. He was there. Natalie could feel his presence like some lethal gas; silent, invisible and deadly.

***Put the candle back and lay down.***

Natalie's hand trembled as a part of her felt compelled to put the candle back on the night-stand. She wanted to keep the light with her. Didn't she? Her head hurt. She became confused. Maybe if she laid down, she'd feel better.

Natalie felt she should remember something. Something Nick had told her. *Think, Nat, THINK!* Why couldn't she remember?

The candle flickered as she set her one source of light back on the cammode.

***Lay down, Natalie. Lay down.***

The Voice was so compelling so seductive, Natalie was finding it hard to resist. Her heartbeat sounded loud in her ears as the words vibrated through her body.

***Lay down, NOW!***

She needed to remember. It was imperative to remember. Natalie gathered her scattered wits and thought of Nick. Picturing him in her mind she tried to recall his words. *The voice! Yes, something about the voice.*

***Lay down, Natalie.***

Even as she fought it, Natalie could feel her body complying with the command.

***Remove the covering.*** The words seeped into her like warmed honey, causing her movements to be slow and sluggish.

A cold draft of air moved across her, pimpling her skin. Her mind raced. Natalie remembered now. It was the voice, **his** voice, manipulating and controlling her. The Blood Tongue, Nick had called it.

"Stop it." Natalie's voice was barely above a whisper, yet she was sure LaCroix heard it.

"Why should I?" His voice spoken out loud was even more compelling than the Blood Tongue. The clenching it caused in Natalie's gut was very disturbing.

Natalie tried to ignore the sensation and concentrate on her immediate problem. She was lying naked on a bed in some hole in the ground.

"Because, I know what you're doing, and now that I know it won't work anymore." Her limbs lost their immobility and began to obey her. She snatched the bedspread closed and sat up. Natalie jumped as LaCroix floated down from the ceiling.

*How stupid can I be, thought Natalie, I looked everywhere but up.*

LaCroix lounged back against one of the armoires Natalie had searched earlier. He was dressed much the same as he had been the other night, or so far as Natalie could tell. The dim light made it hard to see much, except LaCroix's pale face.

"I must admit, you are a lot stronger than Nicholas' other toys. Very amusing."

"Yeah, I always wanted to be a comedian. Is there a purpose for this conversation?" Natalie snapped, tired of this cat and mouse game.

"I'm surprised. Weary of living already?" He smirked a half smile that was becoming all too familiar.

"If you wanted to kill me, you would of done so by now. No, you want something from me." It was easier to verbally fence with LaCroix than to contemplate her predicament. It kept the terror at bay.

"Who says I didn't take what I was after when you were asleep?"

Natalie felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as half remembered dreams surfaced to give his words credit. She glared at him feeling the manipulation again.

"You're lying." Natalie was certain.

"How do you know?" LaCroix countered, his maddening grin grating on Natalie's already taut nerves.

"You're mouth is moving."

"Sharp, very sharp. Dear Nicki **has** raised his standards," the Vampire chuckled.

"I don't think you know Nick at all. He doesn't go in for bimbos."

"He used to." LaCroix moved away from the cabinets, hands buried deep in his expensive trouser pockets. He sauntered towards the bed like some bipedal black panther scenting prey.

Despite her earlier bravado, an over-powering urge to put as much distance between herself and LaCroix as she could brought her back up against the head-board.

He stopped at the end of the bed and leaned negligently on the bedpost. "You think him so noble, don't you?"

"I don't think he's noble, I know it." Nat's fear receded as she came to her friend's defense.

"Ha! Should I tell you of the Blood Orgies we shared?"

Suddenly, LaCroix was hovering above Natalie, inches from her body. "Shall I recount to you the hundreds of souls your precious Nicki has destroyed to prolong his existence. Men, women...children. My beloved Nicholas used to glory in the hunt. The moonlight was his sanctuary, his lover. Now he's as weak as any mortal."

"Are you trying to make me believe that Nick was like you? He was never like you. He was better than you...he is better than you. He never enjoyed what you made of him and you know it. You made a mistake eight hundred years ago. You tried to corrupt the incorruptible and it backfired on you, didn't it LaCroix?"

"You really aren't afraid of me, are you little Natalie? That's good. That's very good. Perhaps I won't kill you after all. I haven't had such a stimulating conversation in a long time."

"Where are my clothes?" Natalie's whispered question gave away her inner turmoil.

"I like you this way." LaCroix's lips never moved. The whispered voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. "Anyway, clothes are such a...human convention."

Natalie ignored the tingling sensation the seductive voice evoked in her. "Well for a guy who thinks clothes are for the birds you sure do have a huge collection."

The soft laugh seemed somehow more dangerous than the Blood Tongue, "You know the old saying, 'clothes make the man.'"

"Or the asshole," Natalie mutter beneath her breath before she could stop herself. The silence that greeted her was as terrifying as tomb.

Cold arms of steel engulfed her, yanking her off the bed. Natalie's knees weakened, as sky-blue eyes penetrated her soul and kindled an unwanted desire. His lips hovered inches above her own, his breath hot on her face. The cover dropped unheeded to the floor as ancient hands caressed and wrung a response from her unwilling flesh.

They floated a foot above the bed his super-natural strength keeping them aloft. "I'm just like Nicky. Can't you find it in yourself to want me? The same darkness that rests in his soul rests in mine. The same danger. You like danger, don't you Natalie?"

His breath was like a furnace against her cheeks, but she couldn't look away. Like a mouse held captive by a snake, she stared her own death in the face.

"The thought of Nicholas taking you by force is erotic to you, primal. It has always been thus between predator and prey. But I can make you feel things little Natalie, you could never dream of in your darkest fantasies."

His chuckle was evil incarnate and Natalie's soul shrank from it. "We are the great seducers. We are great, because we know that pleasure and pain are but a heartbeat apart. Yield to me, Natalie, and all your deepest desires will be fulfilled."

"No," a barely audible whisper escaped her parted lips. She felt his cool fingers caress the crease of her derriere. Her body shivered with sudden aching need.

"You said something about...an asshole?"



A bleary-eyed Don Schanke jerked open the door. "What the hell...?" his colorful phrase died on his lips as he recognized his late night visitor. It

was close to two o'clock in the morning. Nick hated to be disturbing his partner but he had to make sure they were okay.

"Nick what's wrong?" Schanke asked, his large brown eyes seeing more than Nick wished.

"I've...How are you? I was in the neighborhood." Nick knew it sounded lame but he couldn't tell Don the real reason for his nocturnal visit. After Jeanette told him of LaCroix's appearance, Nick could think of nothing but how to protect his friends.his very mortal friends.

He knew Natalie was working graveyard at the morgue and would be surrounded by people therefore she was relatively safe. When Nick had questioned Jeanette, she let slip that LaCroix had been fascinated when he'd seen Nick and Schanke together the other evening. Nick's old master had pumped Jeanette for information on Don and his family.

"Can I come in?" Nick put on his most charming smile and pressed with the Blood Tongue to ensure admittance. Schanke stepped back, his eyes and face becoming blank as the hypnotic suggestion took control of his mind.

Nick stepped inside and glanced around at the subtle country elegance of Schanke's housing-track home. Even with the dire circumstances, Nick had to smile at the attempt at rustic Americana scattered about the room. *Myra at her best.* Nick mused. He knew that the beauty of his partner's home owed nothing to Schanke and everything to his lovely wife.

Schanke followed Nick into the living-room. The ends of his faded blue terry-cloth robe hung open revealing his Blue Jays jersey and his white boxer shorts.

"Okay, Knight, what the hell is going on?" Skank settled himself into a brown leather recliner that looked out of place in the predominantly country setting.

"There's this guy...." Nick stopped, what could he tell Schanke - certainly not the truth.

"Bad?" Schanke fished.

"The worst." Maybe if Don thought LaCroix was some psycho? "He's from my past," Nick began his voice sounding hoarse in the stillness of the room."From a past I don't like to remember. This guy lives for destruction, it's his religion, his creed. He's not just bad, Don, but evil. You don't reason or try to cut a deal with him."

"He's after you?" Schanke's rhetorical question hung in the air between them like an ominous cloud.

"It's not that simple, he's not that simple. If it was a question of killing me, he could have done that years ago." *Centuries ago.* "He attacks by targeting those I care about." Nick looked up into his friend's young brown eyes, "Those I love."

Schanke's crooked smile, filled with understanding and acceptance, tugged at Nick's ancient heart. He looked away, slightly embarrassed. After eight hundred years it was hard admitting he cared, because in admitting, he left himself vulnerable and open to hurt.

"What about Nat?"

"She's safe. She's at the Morgue surrounded by people. He wouldn't dare try to harm her there. Besides, attacking someone in a dark alley is more his style." Nick spat the words out in disgust. "I came over to make sure you--"

"We're fine, Nick, and now that I know, I'll be on my guard." Schanke nodded to his deceptively young partner in silent communication.

Nick grinned. The guy might drive him crazy sometimes but he really did love Schanke. "It would make me feel better if you could check on Myra and Jenny while I'm still here."

"Sure." The smile came again dimpling Schanke's good-natured face.

Nick wandered half way down the hall his heighten hearing easily picking up Myra's sleeping response to Schanke's question. Nick suppressed a chuckle. He stopped a short distance further to gaze with deep longing at the family pictures proudly displayed on the walls. Picnics, soccer games and holidays created a pictorial biography of a happy loving family. The pain went through Nick causing blood tears to fall from in his eyes. He swallowed hard, quickly wiping the red liquid from his cheeks. He certainly wouldn't be able to explain them to Schanke.

He turned and hurried back to the living room to wait for his friend. LaCroix would not have them, Nick promised himself, he would not have them.



The night was waning as Nicholas Knight flew through the skies above Toronto. It had not been a wasted errand. He felt better knowing Schanke and his family were fine. Even though Don had argued against it, Nick had left two Uniforms stationed on his partner's front door step.

*For all the good it would do.*

Nick signed deeply, breathing in the chill pre-dawn air. He loved to fly. It was the one aspect of his existence that made the centuries bearable. But this morning his usual exhilaration was tinged with fear. He found no comfort in the race of the wind through his hair or the carpet of lights far below him. He knew that Monsignor Death stalked the night.

His cellular phone twittered even at this altitude. He needed to land quickly so he could answer the call. Nick's night-vision spied a deserted alley just north and two hundred feet below.

In seconds he had landed and was pulling at the still beeping phone.

"Knight here."

"Nick, thank God." Captain Stonetree sounded agitated.

"What's up, Captain?" Nick had a funny feeling about this call. A premonition that he was not going to like the news his boss had for him.

"Natalie's missing."

The words pressed against Nick's heart like a dead weight. NO!

How could it be? Nat had an assistant and there was a guard posted at the entrance to lab at all times. Nick growled. Outwitted again by the old bastard. When would he learn to expect the unexpected from his master? *But Jeanette had been sure LaCroix would go after Schanke. She was sure.*

"The Bitch!"

"KNIGHT, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?" The bark of his Captain brought Nick back to the present.

"Yes, sir. Have you any leads?" He kept his fear at bay and tried to concentrate on the flow of information he was being fed.

"No, damn it. It's as if she disappeared into thin air. I have half the precinct out looking for her, but it doesn't look good. I wonder if we should haul in Ramirez? Natalie did testify against him in that slaying over on Fifth last month."

"I don't think it was Ramirez, Captain." Nick's mind raced. They could be anywhere. Natalie might already be dead. No. He had to think positive. She was still alive and he would find her.

"Listen, sir, I think I might have an idea."

"Do you want some back-up? I could send Jennings or Roacha--"

"No, sending anybody else might frighten this person into silence, if you know what I mean. I have to go alone."

"All right," Stonetree agreed grudgingly, "But keep me informed."

"I will. Knight out." He switched off his phone and clipped it to his belt.

The rage built inside him. Nick felt like ripping out throats. He wanted to rend, tear, and disembowel something, anything. Like a volcano erupting, Nick leaped into the air, the heat of his anger fueling his ascent. He would break every bone in Jeanette's body and as she painfully mended, ask his questions.



"You lied!" Nick grabbed Jeanette's shoulder and spun her around.

Fierce green eyes burned with the unholy fire of a Vampire. Her fangs erupted, leaving a trail of blood down her chin as she snarled a warning at her ex-Lover. Nick was not put off. He could handle Jeanette. She no longer had the power to manipulate him, to coerce him, to push him beyond his endurance.

He snarled back at her, his own fangs breaking through, causing his gums to bleed. "Where is she, Jeanette?"

"Who?" Her fangs retracted and her eyes assumed a more normal shade as her play of intimidation fell flat on its face.

The Raven was empty at this hour of the morning all the **regulars** having sought their places in the cellar long ago. The black and gray decor, a macabre mixture of old and new styles, had always reminded Nick of a post-modern torture chamber. A fitting residence for Vampires. Even if she cried out, Nick knew her followers would never come to her rescue. That was the nature of the Beast. All for one and one for none.

Jeanette winced slightly. Nick heard the bone of her shoulder snap under his rage-induced strength. He shoved her away with loathing. At least she had enough decency left to look guilty.

"I had to, Nicola," she began, rubbing her injured arm. "He made me promise. You know he has ways of making us do...things."

"He has a way of making **you** do things, not me. Where is she Jeanette?" Nick moved towards her again. If he was going to have to rip it out of her, so be it.

"You can't go, Nick. The girl doesn't matter--"



"She matters to me." His voice was deadly calm, like the eye of a hurricane.

"He wants you," Jeanette screamed, finally losing her patients. "He's using your friend to lure you, don't you see?"

"I've asked you twice now, I'm not going to ask you again." Nick's voice had roughened as his Beast spoiled to draw blood.

"Nicola," Jeanette began, backing away in genuine fear at the death mask that Nick knew his face had become. "I was protecting you. By the Blood, you tried to kill him, and now he wants revenge. How can you go to help this girl knowing it's a trap? It's insanity!"

"No." Nick shook his head, his glowing eyes burning in his skull. "The insanity was leaving the feast with you that night, eight hundred years ago. The insanity was letting myself be seduced by your putrid flesh and turning forever away from the light. But I've been cured, Jeanette. My sanity has returned and I no longer care whether I live or die."

He was at her side in an instant, his powerful fingers closing around her windpipe. Their faces mere heartbeats apart. Nick spat each word into her lovely deceitful face. "I'm already dead, Jeanette, like you. Now where is she?"

"It's probably useless. He more then likely killed her already." It was her last ploy. Nick could read it in her eyes.

"No, she's alive. I can feel it." His hand tightened around her throat. "Where?"

"All mortals die, Nick. Does it really matter how or when?" Those were LaCroix's words. Words he had used to help Nick get over his revulsion to his first victim.

"Nick please, she can't love you the way I love you--"

"You wouldn't recognize love if it came up and bit you on that sweet ass of yours. Now you are going to tell me where LaCroix took Natalie, or I'll make sure that this time when you die it will be for good."

"Then I've truly lost you?" Her eyes were so hurt, for a moment Nick believed her, but just for a moment.

"You lost me the night you let LaCroix turn me into this."



Natalie whimpered as her traitorous body responded to LaCroix's chilling caress.

"Let's see, you said something about an asshole. Hmm, yours looks quite delectable. I think we'll try it on for size, shall we?"

His hand gently squeezed her bottom as his mouth came down softly on her trembling lips. Natalie didn't know what she had expected, but the sensuality of LaCroix's assault seemed somehow a contradiction to all she knew him to be. His hand kept up a hypnotic rhythm between the globes of her round derriere. Against her will her body relaxed into his embrace. Her arms crept up around his neck as she arched her eager young body against his.

LaCroix raised his head and gazed down into her upturned face with twin sapphires of desire. "Yes, my sweet. That's it, don't fight it. Can you feel it, little Natalie? Can you feel my darkness at the edge of your soul?"

God forgive her, but she could and the knowledge was intoxicating. All the vampire movies she had ever watched had romanticized this aspect of the creatures nature. It had turned the profane to the sensual and Natalie realized she was lost in the illusion. *Or is it illusion?* She could no more run away from LaCroix than she could from Nick.

This was sick. She had dreamt of Nick taking her in just this way. Soft, tender, but masterful. *He must be reading my mind finding my most secret dreams and recreating them for his own evil pleasures.*

The sobering thought brought her half way out of her erotic stupor. "NO! Let me go. I don't want this." Her voice was weak, with no real fight behind the words.

The Vampire chuckled. "Of course you do. I can see it in your eyes. I can see you at the age of sixteen, in a darken theatre, wetting you panties at the thought of a dark stranger coming to you in the privacy of you room and making you his."

He floated her over to the bed and laid her down. His gaze held her immobile, as LaCroix removed his own clothing. Natalie couldn't breath. A part of her wanted to see what the layers of clothing hid, while the other more sensible part wanted to flee.

"Such vivid memories, little one." He touched his hand to his now bare chest and made a mocking little bow. "I am honored."

"Don't be," Natalie began, her breathless whisper sounding strange and hollow. "You're not in them."

"But they are about my kind. So, you find us fascinating...and attractive."

The ease with which he read her mind frightened Natalie. How could she plan to escape when he could detect her deepest thoughts and desires? She couldn't help feeling the way she did about vampires.

As a child she had felt safe to desire something she thought was pure myth. Then three years ago, she had met Nick. He had been so different from the monsters of the legends, Nat had let herself believe vampires had received a centuries old bad reputation. Now she knew better. The real truth was settling his hard real body on the bed next to hers.

He reclined on his side facing her, one hand supporting his white-haired head. She refused to look at his body, though she was curious, and kept her eyes fastened on his face. Natalie's breathing quickened, as she watched him wet his middle finger. He trailed a cool path down between her breasts to the tangle of auburn curls at the junction of her legs. His red tongue came out and licked his pale lips, causing Natalie's body to shudder with forbidden hunger.

"Where to begin?" His smile sent shock waves through Natalie's system. For a fleeting moment, she saw the handsome man he must have been in life. But, as quickly as it came, it was gone. She wondered if she had actually seen it at all.

Her body burned, consumed by an unholy fire and LaCroix was the arsonist. He leaned down and captured her breast in his mouth. His hands might be cold as the grave, but his mouth was a hot furnace against her pliant flesh. Her mind clouded as she surrendered to the exquisite sensation LaCroix was evoking with his talented lips.

He tugged and teased, lick and sucked, until Natalie thought she would go insane with the wanting. How could she be repulsed by him and want him at the same time? It was crazy.

Cold hands joined the assault, as LaCroix became serious with his seduction. Natalie detected a slight change in his breathing, which made her think she was affecting him more than he had previously indicated. She felt the sticky wetness between her legs which caused her face to burn with her humiliation, and passion.

His hand brushed through the hair there. LaCroix dampened his fingers with her juices as he caressed the folds of her womanhood. His tongue generated hypnotic circles of fire down over her stomach. His destination was unmistakable. Natalie whimpered and tried to close her legs. She was fighting herself more than LaCroix. As he continued his decent, he dipped his tongue into her navel. She writhed in ecstasy at the erotic caress as a breathless sigh escaped her lips. His triumphant chuckle penetrated the lustful spell.

"If you're going to rape me get on with it."

LaCroix looked up from his position between her legs and smile. "Oh, no, my little Natalie. It won't be rape. You'll want it to happen. You'll beg me to take you. And I will, over and over again, until there is no end to you, no beginning to me. Until you are flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood."

With that he lowered his head. Natalie's body lifted from the huge bed as LaCroix's hot tongue slid over her warm wet flesh. He was merciless in his amorous ministrations. Nat barely had time to catch her breath before another wave of desire consumed her. Time stood still. The world outside ceased. Natalie's whole universe consisted of LaCroix and the unholy pleasure he was giving her. There was no family, no job...no Nick. Only the magnificent creature making her feel things she had never experienced with another man. She wanted them to go on forever. When did she stop fighting him? Natalie didn't know, nor did she care. All she knew was that she couldn't live without this.

"GOD!" The exclamation was torn from her lips as the master Vampire found her feminine nub of pleasure and began to tease it with his tongue.

Was it a prayer or a curse? Natalie didn't know anymore. She was beyond saving now and she knew it. All she could do was ride the storm out. She would think of shame and retribution, escape and redemption, later, but for now she was his and she gloried in her surrender to his darkness.



LaCroix had never tasted anything so sweet. When he had played with her the night before he had thought it was beyond comparison, but with her awake and responding fully to his lovemaking it was Nirvana.

His engorged manhood stood stiff and eager against his abdomen. He was ready to take her now. *Not yet.* He wanted to watch the exquisite expression on her face when she climaxed again. He wanted to feel her shudder in response to his caresses once more. He wanted to fill himself so full of her that it would last centuries. It had to.

It was obvious that Nick had never taken her. LaCroix had never taught his young disciple the trick of making love to a woman without spilling her blood. It was just one more of the little lessons he had left out on purpose. Knowing Nick's penchant for romanticism, the results would have been too sickening for words.

LaCroix raised his head and gazed at the woman beneath him. She was truly beautiful in the way only a mortal woman could be to a vampire. Her eyes were closed tightly and her face averted, but LaCroix knew he

had won. She was his. She wanted him, only him. The tide had turned. He had made her forget Nicholas.

LaCroix could wait no longer. He eased up along the length of her body, relishing the warm feel of her fragrant flesh. His face was wet with her essence. He licked his mouth, capturing every spare drop, every sweet taste of the nectar from his little flower.

*Blast! There I go again sounding like a love-struck fool.* He was angry with himself and with Natalie for his loss of focus. *Who is seducing whom?*

"Natalie," his voice snapped. At her cringe, he brought his seductive voice back into play. "Natalie, look at me."

He saw the stray tear escape her tightly shut lids and quickly leaned down and caught it with his tongue. **"Look at me, little one."**

The Blood Tongue worked. She turned and looked up at him, her dark blue eyes passion-filled yet haunted. "Pleased," she begged, her full lips trembling, "Don't do this."

**"Open your legs for me, ma petite,"** he pressed. Her compliance was immediate. LaCroix found himself cradled between her hot thighs. His breathing became ragged, as desire consumed him. The ancient black beast buried deep inside him sprang to the surface and he was possessed with the urge to take her fully and quickly.

Reaching down, he slipped his arms beneath her legs exposing her moist hot entrance to his eager throbbing flesh. "Now, my Natalie," he began, as his fangs erupted and his eyes began to burn, "Now you are mine."

With that, he plunged into her inviting heat with barely chained veracity. Natalie screamed in response as her body was immediately racked by a strong orgasm. LaCroix held himself still within her letting, her passion subside before he began to move against her. He could care less if he hurt her, his need was too great.

He was surrounded by her softness, her warmth. His mouth found hers again. Her lips were slightly parted and his tongue needed no further invitation. His hips ground his hardened flesh into her clinging channel, as his tongue matched that rhythm and expanded on it. He felt her arms grasping at him as her slender hips rose up to meet each of his deep thrusts. He had never felt so empowered, so elated, so...alive. Not even with Jeanette, his practiced whore, had he enjoyed this heightened passion.

His rhythm changed as he drew near his own release. He broke their kiss. "Look at me, Natalie." There was a pleading quality in his voice, but he

didn't care. The moment was at hand and his victory needed to be complete. "LOOK AT ME!"

Natalie's heartbeat pounded in his ears and her blood sang its siren song. Her eyes opened, the lids heavy with her passion. "Say my name." She shook her head. LaCroix was amazed she still had enough of herself in control to do that. He knew he was rapidly losing his own.

**"Say my name."** The pleading quality turned to begging. It was close now. His hips slammed into her body with a force that shook the bed. He was careful not to let himself go completely. He didn't want her death, yet.

His tongue lolled out between his razor sharp canines as he felt the pressure build in his groin. "Say it...please." The courtesy was torn from his lips.

**"LACROIX!"**

He arched against her as his own orgasm exploded into her with the force of a volcano. Eruption after eruption he pored into her eager flesh until with one deep thrust that was much stronger than the rest, he collapsed on her warm damp body.

Her sweat was like perfume, the scent of her passion like a aphrodisiac to LaCroix's powerful senses. He raised his head from where it rested on her breast and gazed into her startled, tear-filled eyes.

He knew his smile was tender, he probably looked the fool, but he couldn't help it. She had given him a gift more precious than the blood that sustained his life. She had given him herself.

With trembling hands she reached up to caress his beardless face. Tears overflowed and she bit her lip in confusion. "Again?" She whispered brokenly.

The question sent off alarms in every part of LaCroix's being. This was a trap that no amount of Black Magic would ever save him from. But he could already feel himself hardening inside her. He gave the only answer he could, "Forever, my love. Forever."

Natalie came back to herself for one brief moment. Some part of her was still fighting against him, but that part was becoming weaker with each passing moment.

"Nick, help me--" Her plea was swallowed as LaCroix's mouth covered hers, smothering Natalie's resistance and she was engulfed, once more, by the darkest knight.



Nick took to the early evening sky heading North. He had spent the day awake and in frustrated rage at his inability to immediately search for Natalie. The sun's rays, a life giver to most things on the planet, had kept him a virtual prisoner with its lethal light. He wouldn't have died in that light. He was too old to be killed by the sun, but it would have left him injured and weak. And that was no way to fight his old mentor.

For the first time in over a century Nick had contemplated killing again. There was far more strength in human blood than in the animal blood he had resorted to, just to stay alive. He needed every ounce of power to defeat LaCroix. But the very thought had turned his stomach. Mayhaps he was developing a allergic reaction. *Fat Chance.*

He'd drunk several bottles of cows blood before leaving, but now he wasn't sure if it would be enough. He would have to call Sid at the slaughter house tomorrow to obtain some more, that is if Nick was still alive tomorrow.

The sparser lights of the suburbs twinkled far below Nick. He allowed himself to imagine what it would be like to come home to a wife and child...or children. Nick shook his head in bemusement. Whatever else he was, Nick was always honest with himself. That life was as far beyond him as redemption. *Ah, but I can dream.*

The houses were fewer and farther apart, the manicured lawns beginning to give way to rugged forest. If Jeanette told the truth, then somewhere in the mountains he would find Natalie...and LaCroix.

Her name brought back a special memory to Nick. They had been playing Monopoly and Nick -- like the robber baron he was -- had been steadily acquiring all the choice pieces of real-estate. Natalie had accused him of cheating, claiming their was no fair play in his machivellian heart. The evening had ended with a delightfully playful pillow fight, but that time he had let her win.

His heart lurched suddenly when his happy memory transformed. He imagined himself standing over a body. A jumble of bones and flesh. The auburn hair unmistakable, as were the china-blue eyes.

*No!* His mind screamed as he soured towards the distant mountains. *I'm coming Natalie. Hold on-- Please, I'm coming.*



Natalie lay on her stomach, exhaustion making her limbs feel like lead weights. She felt the cool caress of LaCroix's hand up her spine. She

couldn't have mustered enough energy for a token resistance if she had wanted to.

They had mated --Natalie refused to call what they had done making love-- four times already and LaCroix showed no signs of slowing. She had never felt such incredible ecstasy, yet it had come with a price.

LaCroix had shattered something in her. She couldn't put a name to it, but she knew somehow she was changed. She wasn't a vampire. He hadn't turned her...yet. But there was a darkness building inside her. A terrifying pit which threatened everything she believed herself to be. Perhaps it had always been there, needing a catalyst to set it free, or perhaps LaCroix's own darkness was insinuating itself upon her soul. The ultimate intimacy. The ultimate depravity.

"Tired, my little Natalie?" He dropped a light kiss in the center of her back. "I'm sorry." He didn't sound it. "Your charms quite carried me away."

The deep seductive purr of his voice radiated an involuntary shiver down Natalie's spine.

"Bastard." There wasn't much heat in the word.

"So I've been called. But coming from you, I consider it a compliment. He reached across her body and tugged at her shoulder, easily rolling her over on to her back.

His eyes were liquid blue flames of passion. *So beautiful. why didn't I ever notice their beauty?*

"**Kiss me.**" His soft command sang through her blood. The roof of her mouth tingled in anticipation.

She raised up on her elbows and touched his cold pale cheek. "I hate you." It was said more for herself than for him.

"Of course you do. I wouldn't have it any other way."

They kissed, his long-dead mouth meshing and drawing forth the appropriate response from her warm mortal lips. He seemed to be able to drain her essence through her very skin. His tongue entered her mouth, its scalding heat in such contrast to the lifeless exterior.

Natalie moaned deeply, already lost as a wave of desire washed over her. The product of their previous play still clung to the insides of her thighs.

*I'm shameless!* Her mind cried, even as her hips ground invitingly against LaCroix's *Shameless or freed.* Was the thought hers or his?



Natalie couldn't be sure. She suspected that LaCroix had a way of injecting thoughts and emotions into his victims. Into her.

He ended their kiss. Natalie no longer had the power to deny him anything. Her befuddled senses didn't understand why he had stopped. He seemed to be listening to something. His smile was chilling and his eyes took on a feral gleam.

He turned back to her, his eyes alight with a deadly glow."It's show time."



Nick had found the cave high up the side of the cliff with little difficulty. At least Jeanette's directions had been accurate. It was definitely the lair of a vampire. There was no way to reach the crevice unless one could fly. It was a perfect retreat. A perfect prison.

He had flown with the night, reaching the mountain just as the first golden rays of dawn broke over the horizon. He slipped into the entrance amazed that there was no kind of barrier to guard it. Even with the inaccessibility of the opening, there were other dangers, immortal dangers to take into to consideration.

*Ah, LaCroix you're not that stupid. There are barriers, but you left the front door open, didn't you? For me.* Nick could smell the trap, but he had no choice. His friend was in there, somewhere, and he would go through the pits of hell to get her out. *A very appropriate analogy.*

The tunnel was dark and dank, the early spring run-off creating puddles every few feet. Nick's night vision served him well. The long passageway sloped gently downward. Nick had to use great care not to slip on the slick uneven floor. He felt as if he was descending into the bowels of the earth. Only LaCroix would think of something so symbolic.

The trail twisted and turned in the bedrock, until even Nick with his vampire sense of direction, was getting confused. Hours later, his frustration beginning to mount, he heard a distant feminine moan, in pain or in pleasure, Nicholas was not sure, but it had to be Natalie.

He raced towards the sound, his powerful heart beating a wild staccato in his ears. Nick unchained his beast letting the dark creature consume him. He needed the power his dark half could give him in order to even stand a chance against his old master.

Light spilled from an opening as Nick came around the last bend in the tunnel. The moans had turned into cries of agony. A enraged growl escaped his lips. Natalie's screams were constant now. Nick's fury accelerated him into the chamber.

He stopped horrified. NO! They lay sprawled on a large bed, their staining naked bodies intertwined. LaCroix's mouth was firm against Natalie's throat.

"NO!" Nick's shout brought the couple's attention towards the entrance.

Natalie screamed, as she ineffectually tried to push LaCroix off of her. He seemed to be amused by her efforts.

"Nicholas, you have the worst timing. I was just about to make her **come...again.**"

Nick felt like someone had kicked him in the gut. *MAKING LOVE?! They were making love.* He felt betrayal, rage, hurt and a jumble of other darker emotions that had no name. A red haze filled Nick's vision.

Natalie's whimpers and pleas finally seemed to have some affect on LaCroix, or maybe he just wanted a less vulnerable position. He withdrew from her too quickly, drawing a pain filled moan from her.

He stood before his old pupil naked, his body still half aroused. Natalie's scent clung to him, the imprint of her body showing clearly on LaCroix's pale flesh.

"I guess I forgot a couple of pertinent lessons.OOPS." The Bastard had the nerve to shrug his shoulders.

Nick's answer was to lunge at LaCroix's throat. His old mentor easily sidestepped the move. Nick whirled around, but LaCroix was already on the opposite side of the room.

"You were always a fool when it came to this sort of thing, dear Nicholas. I've often thought it a very strange duplicity in you. Such a brilliant man who can become such an idiot over a woman. You must be unique."

"The only thing that makes me unique, is that I still have a heart." Nick's voice was ragged with his emotions. He wanted nothing more than to sink his teeth into LaCroix's flesh and rip-out his throat.

He lunged again, this time catching his advisory, who hadn't bothered evade him. Cold hands closed around an equally cold neck and began to squeeze. The skin would not yield. It felt like the stone that surrounded them.

LaCroix stood there naked and smiling completely at ease. After several more seconds Nick released his grip."Oh don't stop, Nicholas. We haven't been this close in years."



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Nick stepped back and eyed his nemesis. He should have caused some kind of damage to the older Vampire. This did not look good.

"We were never close." Nick crossed to the bed and reached for Natalie, intent on offering his comfort. She shrank from his touch, as if revolted, clutching the bed cover to her body. She wouldn't meet his eyes. He could only imagine the humiliation she was going through.

Nick heard the wardrobe creak. He turned just in time to see LaCroix fully dressed. The devil was fast, Nick granted, but if it took every ounce of his strength, Nick would make LaCroix pay.

"Time to die, old man." Nick's voice was tinged with a growl.

"I would love to accommodate you, Nicky, but I've gotta' run."

"Coward!"

"Whatever. You see what I've learned from our last encounter, dear Nicholas. My folly before was letting my emotions run away from me. Being killed a second time cured me of that." He reached for his long black split coat lying across the end of the bed.

"She belongs to me now, Nicholas, in ways you could never understand."

"No. I won't let you touch her again."

"You have no say in the matter," LaCroix's voice snapped like a whip the pretense of calm assurance evaporating like fog in sunlight. "She is mine now and no power on earth or in hell will keep me from her. And certainly not you."

LaCroix moved towards Nick, an old predator stalking the younger, willing him to back down. Nick stood his ground. There was no running from LaCroix, Nick finally understood that now. "You won't hurt her anymore."

"Hurt her? Never. SHE IS MINE! My lover--"

Nick turned his face away from the triumphant possessiveness of LaCroix's gaze. LaCroix grasped his chin and snapped his face back around to lock eyes. "I will come for her. Perhaps tomorrow, or a month from now or a year from now. You'll never know when I'll appear. And that not knowing will do more damage then if I'd rent you limb for limb."

"I would kill her first, before allowing you to have her again." Nicholas vowed.

"Pretty talk, but we both know it's just talk. You'll never hurt her."

Nick felt the blood tears on his face. He had lost again and this time the price was Natalie's very soul.

LaCroix sauntered towards the entrance, wallowing in his victory. "I will be back Nicholas. Wait for me, ma petite Natalie." He smiled at the broken whimper that met his statement. He turned and was gone.

Nick didn't bother to follow, knowing it would be useless. The bastard was more slippery than an eel. He turned instead to his friend, Natalie. His quick gaze searched the ivory skin barely hidden by the blanket she held. There was no marks on her body, but her behavior spoke more clearly than any physical sign of brutality.

"Natalie." Nick reached for her again and again she shrank from him.

"Don't look at me Nick, please." Her tears came in earnest, blotching her complexion.

"This is my fault. If I hadn't come...If we hadn't become friends...." Nick couldn't go on.

This was his fault. LaCroix was his fault. He came around the end of the bed and took her into his arms, easily withstanding her mortal attempts at resistance. Pressing Natalie's head against his shoulder, Nick began to rock her gently. If this was all he could offer her, so be it. He had failed in his duty to his friend, but he promised himself she would be avenged.

*Do you hear that, LaCroix? She will be avenged.*



LaCroix slipped into his secret chamber with just the barest stirring of wind to mark his passing. The room, several meters from the bed chamber, was his last strong hold at the mountain location and he knew that not even Nicholas with his vampiric senses would be able to discover his whereabouts. Even if his old disciple did try, it would take him several days to realize that the dead-end rock face was a door. LaCroix was safe.

But then safety was not what he craved at the moment. He crossed the dark damp room, ignoring the prehistoric cave markings. His eyes were barely able to penetrate the total blackness of the chamber as he sat on the stone slab. LaCroix took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the woman that still clung to him, and sighed. She would haunt him, this one. He couldn't explain why, but he knew that it would be a long time before Natalie Lambert faded from his memory. Luckily for him, he had an eternity.

*Just enough time*, LaCroix mentally rubbed his hands. *Just enough time to destroy Nicholas, piece by piece*. He had started already. He had planted doubt and mistrust between Natalie and Nicholas, and it would rip them apart.

LaCroix lay down on the alter where once he had been worshipped as a god and relaxed. He allowed his dark thoughts to caress ideas of mayhem and debauchery, as his ancient body became as still and lifeless as a corpse. The deep sleep of his kind stole over his consciousness like the warm waters of a calm sea. His last thought was of auburn hair and liquid blue eyes.

**Natalie....**



Natalie looked up at the sound of her name. She recognized the call, as a fierce trembling possessed her. She buried her face in the Nick's black leather jacket. Terror engulfed her like a tidal wave, leaving her floundering with despair.

"Oh God, help me." Great wrenching sobs racked her body. She was drowning and not even Nick's comforting words could reach her. Natalie belonged to the Darkest Knight and she knew he would never release her. She was lost...forever.

**To Be Continued....**





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